FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR: REAL-TIME STRATEGY REDEFINED

XBN

XBOX NATI[ON] [TH]E XB[OX]

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS AND INFO

PRINCE OF PERSIA

The classic adventure returns in grand style. Behold the evolution of 3D gaming

HANDS-ON
LORD OF THE RINGS: RETURN OF THE KING
P. 048

FIRST LOOK

NINJA GAIDEN

Neither Dead nor Alive, Team Ninja leaves the Xtreme Beach to reawaken an arcade legend

REVIEW

ENTER THE MATRIX

Atari unleashes the biggest movie-licensed videogame to date. And the verdict *is*....

▶ **Tony Hawk's *T.H.U.G.***
A skateboarding adventure game? Say it ain't so! (It is.)

▶ **Bill Roper, Blizzard**
XBN taps into the strategic mind of *Starcraft: Ghost*

▶ ***Breakdown***
A first-person brawler? Namco takes a stab...

ZIFF DAVIS

XBN 009 AUG.-SEP. 2003
$5.99 U.S. $6.99 Canada
WWW.GAMERS.COM

09>

0 70992 06980 4

Display Until Sep. 16

STREETS ARE FOR WUSSIES

PlayStation®2

Who needs pavement when you're behind the wheel of a souped-up MINI Cooper? Tear through subway stations, rip apart golf courses, and plow through storm drains as you pull off the ultimate gold heist.

THE ITALIAN JOB®

A high-octane arcade racer based on the 2003 blockbuster movie.

Race through L.A. driving 10 different vehicles.

Master 4 modes from death-defying stunt driving to multiplayer madness.

Bonus features including movie footage, concept art, and more!

CLIMAX

Paramount

EIDOS INTERACTIVE

ItalianJobGame.com

IN STORES NOW!

Change the 3-D spaceship layout to achieve objectives

Experience fast action & reflex intense battles

Based on the popular Dino Crisis franchise

WITNESS THE RE-EVOLUTION

You and your partners are on a search-and-rescue mission. Armed with hyper-speed booster units and an arsenal of futuristic weaponry, you'll confront ferocious space mutations and evolved forms of dinosaur creations in your quest to solve the mysterious re-appearance of a spaceship named Ozymandias.

XBOX

DINO CRISIS 3

DINO CRISIS™ 3

CAPCOM

CAPCOM.COM

|||BRADYGAMES®
Strategy Guide
AVAILABLE
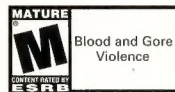
XBOX

MATURE
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Violence

XBN 009 CONTENTS
THE LET'S TALK ABOUT OUR FEELINGS ISSUE

012

THE M.U.S.C.L.E. EDITION

Crossing the Platform

Cross-platform development. It's an issue that has raged since the dawn of console gaming, and will doubtless persist until its demise.

One side of the argument is best exemplified by Tomonobu Itagaki of Tecmo's Team Ninja. His decidedly unambiguous take on the matter is clearly in favor of single-console priority. "I'm sick and tired of everyone going multiplatform and taking the easy way out," Itagaki told *Xbox Nation*. Tecmo is, of course, in a particularly fortunate position, receiving not only strong support from Microsoft, but also from its dutiful fanbase. Tecmo's case is compelling, as Itagaki points out the fact that while there are many developers with far more SKUs on the market than Tecmo, the combined sales of each of those individual publishers is far below Tecmo's total retail numbers.

"I feel that it's meaningless to port what was on PlayStation 2 to Xbox," Itagaki says of recent *XBN* cover game *Soul Calibur II*. "The only way to fully appreciate—or be appreciated by—the Xbox machine, is to do things like *Dead or Alive: Online*, where you make use of everything that's there. So *Soul Calibur II* is a port, while ours is a new creation from scratch. This is not a quote but a fact: In Japan, the combined sales of the three versions of *Soul Calibur II* have not matched those of the single-platform *DOA 3*."

Aside from the obvious self-promotion behind Itagaki's words, the point becomes clear when looking at the only two games to receive perfect scores in *XBN*'s history. Perhaps it's no coincidence both *Halo* and *Steel Battalion* were designed exclusively and specifically for Xbox hardware, employing the technical and physical possibilities of the machine.

Ubi Soft's Yannis Mallat takes a more utilitarian perspective on multiplatform publishing. It's one that perceives the market in a different light, and attempts to maximize the potential of each console while still maintaining the widest spread possible. *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* will see a simultaneous release across all three platforms, as an extra team works to optimize the game for Xbox with improved character models and textures, Xbox Live support, and so forth. It's not built from the ground-up on Xbox; rather, it's retrofitted from a few branches high. Of course, a game's quality depends on its fundamental game design and general level of artistry, but the question still lingers: Does console-inclusivity dilute a game's technical prowess and, therefore, compromise the entire experience?
Evan Shamoon

Team

Evan Shamoon
The Penmaster!

Kids: Don't try this at home. Evan Shamoon, aka The Shockmaster, is a trained professional who went to school for four years to learn how to get hit on the head with a folding chair and live. In his spare time, he likes to sign autographs for geeks of the pencil-necked variety, all of whom are not fit to drink the sweaty leakings inside his wrasslin' boots.

Cindy Lum
Snakebite Cindy

Now coming down to the ring with her pet and personal adviser "Cuddles," Snakebite Cindy, hails from the Mohave and is attended to by six trained medical "professionals," if you know what we're saying. She'll knock you flat six ways to Sunday and still have time to question your parentage, which is, in fact, questionable.

Che Chou
Russian Hammer

Though he's as Russian as Sadaharu Oh, Che Chou has been dubbed the Russian Hammer. He despises you weak-minded capitalists with your toilet paper and "freedom." See, the thing is, Chou's manager Nikolai "The Bolshevik" Svdenko "forgot" to tell Chou the Soviet Empire fell more than 10 years ago.

David Ziganay
The Haircut

Nucleated science gave birth to The Haircut, a fearsome grappler who assaults his foes with body and shine. His manager, The Tonsorialist will often present bags of The Haircut's sheddings to lucky members of the moronic, intellectually shriveled yokels who attend his matches. If you cut him, he will bleed only Herbal Essence.

Greg Orlando
Mr. Dignity!

Though he's wheeled into the ring in a cage, jabbed at with sticks by his handler Zabbo, regularly pelted by fruits and vegetables (including squash), partnered with Dr. Embarrassment, and enters the squared circle to "Sailing" by Christopher Cross, Greg Orlando would urge you to please, please let him have his dignity.

Andrew Mendoza
X The X-enator

Who is the mysterious X the X-enator? Does he really, as the ring announcer proclaims, hail from Planet X in the Xenaga galaxy? Is it really appropriate behavior to rip an opponent's face off to suck the sweet, sweet fluids within so that X can send them back to the home planet to be used as interstellar Chap Stick? We may never know.

DEEP IN CUBA, THE GHOSTS

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

WE ARE
THE NATION'S CHOSEN FEW.
WE ARE SWIFT, SILENT, AND INVISIBLE.
WE WILL NEVER SURRENDER.
WE FIGHT, SO THAT PEACE MAY REIGN.
WE ARE THE GHOSTS.

SQUAD-BASED BATTLEFIELD COMBAT

With a new single-player campaign, 12 new multiplayer maps, and downloadable missions, the TOTAL BATTLEFIELD EXPERIENCE just got a whole lot steamier. In the wake of Castro's death, the Ghosts battle a drug-funded warlord threatening Cuba's first free elections in decades. It's up to you and your team to take the fight to the enemy in the streets, beaches and jungles of Cuba. Take on rebels, irregulars and mercenary troops to face the Ghosts' greatest challenge yet.

MATURE
M
Blood and Gore
Violence
CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

Ubi Soft
ENTERTAINMENT
www.ubi.com

Red Storm
ENTERTAINMENT

XBOX
LIVE
ONLINE ENABLED
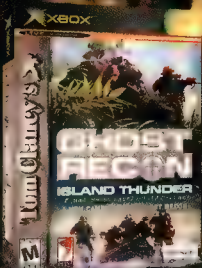
The Empire Strikes Back

Microsoft brings out its big guns with *Halo 2*, *B.C.*, and *True Fantasy Live Online* at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo

Having now paid its third visit to the Electronics Entertainment Expo, Xbox has seemingly all but solidified its place in both the annals and future of videogame history. One stroll around the show floor and any lingering doubts that the console might go the way of Sega's Dreamcast are swiftly dismissed; aside from Nintendo and Sony, nearly every developer at the show seemed keen to show off its Xbox wares.

While there was no mention of Xbox 2, first-party hardware announcements came in the form of a "home-entertainment center"-style MP3 mixer (see news story on page 28) and a price-drop on the console, from $200 to $180. Perhaps more significant was the unveiling of XSN, Microsoft's dedicated online sports gaming network. All titles within the XSN Sports brand will feature Web-based technology allowing one to organize leagues, build tournaments, and prepare schedules from a centralized Web site, XSNsports.com. It will be possible to check stats on a virtual sports page, as Xbox Live will automatically broadcast up-to-date scores, standings, tendencies, trade proposals, and schedules every 15 minutes.

Third-party games came in the form of Ubi Soft's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, and *Far Cry*; Team Ninja's *Ninja Gaiden*; THQ's *Full Spectrum Warrior*; and Ion Storm's *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War*. Korean developer NCSoft's lineup—which included only one Xbox title, *Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders*, but several other PC games which may eventually see life on the console—also came as a pleasant surprise. Low points included the absence of Double Fine's long-awaited *Psychonauts*, as well as first-party developer Rare's decidedly unimpressive showing of *The Games of Aire Ltd*.

The star of the show, however, came in the form of Valve's *Half-Life 2* (see news story on page 16). While the game was only shown on PC, the level of technical and interactive sophistication was, quite literally, years ahead of any other game at the show. An Xbox release date has yet to be announced, but Valve has confirmed that the game will indeed see release on the console, and that the engine which powers it converts well to Xbox hardware. Whether the system can handle the game in all of its glory, however, remains to be seen.
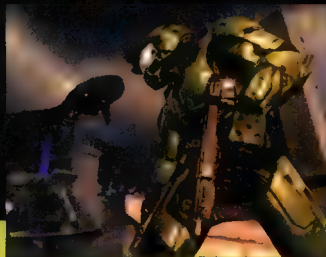
Halo 2
Pub: Microsoft **Dev:** Bungie **Date:** Spring 2004

Bungie gave showgoers a glorious taste of *Halo 2* with a nine-minute, real-time, in-game demo that takes place in New Mombasa, Africa. Although much of the gameplay was choreographed, *Halo 2* features a Master Chief able to wield dual weapons, man stationary guns, ride shotgun in NPC-controlled Warthogs, carjack Ghosts, and much more. The game did not disappoint

B.C.
Pub: Microsoft **Dev:** Intrepid **Date:** TBA 2004

Simply brilliant. Intrepid's stone-age sim floored *Xbox Nation* with its lush, detailed graphics, open-ended gameplay scenarios, and virtual eco-systems. In *B.C.*, players build and lead a tribe of humans amid the hazards of the Jurassic age. Although somewhat overshadowed by studio-mate Big Blue Box's *Fable*, *B.C.* came into its own with the ferocity of a Velociraptor.

True Fantasy Live Online
Pub: Microsoft **Dev:** Level-5 **Date:** TBA 2004

True Fantasy Live Online allayed fears that Level-5's massively multiplayer online RPG would play out like a lame re-enactment of *EverQuest Adventures* on the PlayStation 2. Thankfully, not only does *Fantasy* look about 354-times better than *EverQuest*, the game also introduces innovative MMORPG features that promote social interaction online.

Fable

Pub: Microsoft **Dev:** Big Blue Box **Date:** TBA 2004

Hours before going to press, *XBN* received word from the boys in Redmond that *Fable* has been officially delayed until sometime next year. Based on what was shown behind closed doors at E3, we could have guessed as much. *Fable*'s ambitious "hero system" continues to show a lot of promise—but the game still needs time. Fingers are crossed for this one.

The Games of Rare Ltd.

Pub: Microsoft **Dev:** Rare **Date:** TBA for all games

Of the three titles first-party developers Rare showed at E3, *Kameo: Elements of Power* was the most polished. Graphically frivolous, *Kameo* is the embodiment of the 3D adventures synonymous with the Rare name. Sadly, both *Conker: Live and Uncut*, an online shooter, and *Grabbed by the Ghoulies*, a "humorous beat-'em-up," were disappointingly uninspired. $375 million for...this?

Counter-Strike: Condition Zero

Pub: Microsoft **Dev:** Ritual **Date:** Winter 2003

Xbox Live killer app *Counter-Strike* was playable on the show floor, and *XBN* was there to exchange hot virtual lead with other E3 attendees. Although, without a mouse and keyboard, the game seems to lose a little of the magic that elevates its PC counterpart to online savior status, *Condition Zero* on the Xbox was still, far and away, the best online console shooter at the show.

Conster-Nation

We are indeed the products we buy. I am the Converse sneakers on my feet, the Levi's jeans below the waist, and the Old Navy button-down shirt my mother bought me for my birthday that makes me want to kick my own ass.

Ads on the TV assault my senses. When I'm at the movies, I get commercials before the show and product placements during it. Billboards have gained the ability to follow me as I walk down the street.

Now, when I play *Hulk* on my Xbox, I can enjoy a lovely and extended cutscene where Dr Bruce Banner stares longingly at a can of Mountain Dew. It's also possible for me to admire the Jade Giant plodding past many carefully placed ads.

Hulk is not the first game to feature product placements, nor will it be the last—but it is one of the most blatant; also because I am so lazy I expect the Tropicana Grape Juice™ I drink to pour itself down my throat, I am not willing to do any more research on the matter. (See *RLH* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4* for other notable product placement offenders.)

Games need not be a canvas on which the artist paints ads to pay his mortgage. We are consumers in a world where everything, even art, is for sale. But the price we're paying is entirely too great; the result is a disdain for the consumer and an almost orgiastic worship of the dollar. You're no longer just a game player, but also someone's bottom line. And that $$$ucks.

SPAWN OF MCFARLANE
Comic book mastermind and Zoolander look-alike Todd McFarlane has Soul aplenty

Try as we might, Todd "Moneybags" McFarlane will not purchase a signed copy of *Xbox Nation* #1 for $10 million. The comic artist-turned-millionaire may sound like a boob with his brash and over-cheery Brooklynesque twang (he's originally from Canada), but he's actually a shrewd businessman who's carved an empire from spider webs and a comic book creep named Spawn.

Now, McFarlane, who once paid $2.7 million for Mark McGwire's 70th home-run ball, has turned his eye toward videogame consoles in general and Xbox in specific. Partnering with Namco, McFarlane created a brand-new brawler Necrid for the 3D fighter *Soul Calibur II*. What's more, his creation Spawn (you remember Spawn from comic books, a major motion picture, endless toys, an animated series, and two mediocre videogames) will be featured as an exclusive, playable character in *Soul Calibur II* for Xbox, and will have his own Namco-produced game released on all consoles by year's end. Though McFarlane was not at liberty to talk about the *Spawn* game during the interview, Namco showed

the game, which is a third-person action brawler, at E3.

Ever the keen promoter, McFarlane took some time out to talk about how his soul still burns...

Xbox Nation: Besides creating Necrid and allowing Spawn to be in *Soul Calibur II*, did you do any work in terms of creating character moves?
Todd McFarlane: No, not really. I'm not that much of a video expert. They gave me some of the guidelines of what it was that they were sort of looking for for the characters, like whether he is a good guy or bad guy. Whether he was going to be big and hulking, or whether he was going to be nimble.

XBN: Spawn is kind of a brawler. Do you think there's a problem with him fitting into *Soul Calibur*?
McFarlane: No, not really. Again, when I look at a video game I just go what works and what makes sense. So from a Spawn perspective, I'm less concerned about—maybe this is silly—but I'm less concerned about what is consistent with matching up with issue 66 in his comic book than I am about

what would make a cool character in the videogame. My first instinct is to ask what we have to do to Spawn to make him cool in the videogame to a person who knows nothing about Spawn.

XBN: Did you wince when you saw what some game companies did to Spawn?
McFarlane: Not really. Again, I'm not a true connoisseur, so I wasn't able to sort of be overly critical with it. You also had limitations on technology at that time, combined with whether [the companies] made the right decisions or not.

I'm not one for worrying about that kind of stuff. It's 2003 now, and I don't worry about some games that came out in '96 look like.

XBN: In a battle royale with Spawn, Bill Gates, comic guru Stan Lee, and a horde of sassy robots, who would emerge victorious?
McFarlane: I would have to say Bill Gates because he's the smartest guy. He would figure some way to neutralize everyone else technology-wise and win the day.

Tax This, Sucker!

If New York State representative Felix Ortiz has his way, a nationwide one percent tax hike will come into effect for all items that promote obesity. One of Ortiz's targets? Videogames.

Where's *Galleon*?

The oft-delayed Xbox adventure *Galleon* now contains 30 percent more inexplicable postponements. Expect *Galleon* to see release when flesh-eating C.H.U.D.s take over

Metallica: The Game?

Bring the *St Anger* to Xbox! A trailer for the vehicle-based combat game starring rock band Metallica has surfaced at www.computerandvideogames.com

KILLING = GOOD
Study shows correlation between first-person shooters, visual skills

The journal *Nature* recently reported on a study showing the positive effects of first-person shooters on the visual acuity of those who play them.

The published data, released on May 29, claims experienced game players are 30 to 50 percent better than non-game players at noticing all that happens around them. Game players, the study noted, also are more able to perceive and identify items in their peripheral vision and can more easily switch their attention and track multiple objects at one time.

"Some people think that videogames are turning kids into supergeniuses or psycho killers," Kurt Squire, who designs educational games at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told CNN.com. "The reality is probably close to this, where people can process visuals much quicker and be able to discern between different types of information."

Blessed Art Thou
England-based mag gets lo-fi with games

Outside of commercially funded magazines, there exists a community of avid gamers devoted to producing independent, self-published commentary on videogames.

Blessed takes a garage approach to its subject matter, eschewing many game magazine staples and engaging various game-related issues, ranging from rhythm-action game accessories and the death of the 2D shoot-'em-up, to a discussion of failed and successful uses of "the on-screen map" in contemporary gaming. Beam over to their web site www.blessedmagazine.com for more info.

OPENING PANDORA'S BOX

A sequel to Ubi Soft's stealth-action hit *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* is pretty much a no-brainer. As an Xbox exclusive for the better part of the 2002 holiday shopping spree, the highly coveted *Cell* was once the envy of every non-Xbox owner.

And if sales numbers are to be believed, the game remains the only other Xbox title to even approach the runaway success of Bungie's *Halo*. Arguably, much of that early success came during the game's mid-year reign on Xbox.

For its encore presentation, Ubi Soft is taking the buckshot approach by releasing sequel *Pandora Tomorrow* simultaneously on all three platforms spring 2004. As proven by the PlayStation 2 and GameCube versions of *Cell*, there is little doubt that

the game will remain graphically consistent across all platforms. What will make a difference this time around is *Pandora*'s online play.

While Ubi Soft has yet to shed specifics about *Pandora*'s online gameplay, sources report that the game, running on a souped-up version of the *Cell* engine, will lean on the side of cooperative play, although

deathmatch options haven't been entirely been ruled out. Expect lots of tactical collaborations among players to negotiate *Cell*'s stealthy levels. A full preview of the game is forthcoming.
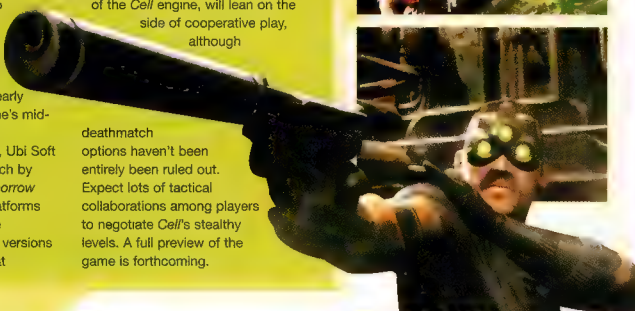
Shock the X-Monkey

TechTV's Kevin Rose recently let the world in on a sick little secret: He's created Xshok, the world's first Xbox controller to deliver a 20,000 volt electrical shock as a masochistic kind of force feedback for games. In Rose's own words, he wanted to "make gameplay more exciting." These jolts are comparable to the zap of household static electricity—only multiplied by 10. TechTV, which shows an illustrated step-by-step on how to install the torturing device, warns that the mod should be performed by an expert electrician.

Oh, and it also warns that pregnant women should stay far away from the Xshok.

Atari, Not Infogrames
The new Atari is really the old Infogrames under a brand-new name that's really quite old. Atari originated as a term from the ancient game Go. It means "attack." And now you know.

Worst. Game. Ever!
Straight from Japan comes *Battle Raper*, a PC game that delicately fuses fighting action with realtime, adult-themed molestation. Our cookies have been tossed.

Death Be Not Pretty
Pit Mr. T against Anna Nicole Smith in the battle no one wants to see, let alone pay to play in Gotham Games' depressing *Celebrity Deathmatch*. It's coming to Xbox!

HALF-LIFE 2: THE SECOND COMING

Valve Software's highly-anticipated first-person shooter owns E3

Since the release of its groundbreaking first-person shooter *Half-Life*, developer Valve has seen the second Gulf War, the end of a millennium, the sequencing of the first human chromosome, the death of a Beatle, and two terrible *Star Wars* sequels. Through it all, the group has kept a remarkably tight lid on anything having to do with a true follow-up to their seminal sci-fi shooter—until now. Valve tore the veils from their forthcoming videogame opus *Half-Life 2* at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo.

Xbox Nation was on-hand to witness the 15-minute in-game presentation, and frankly, watching protagonist Gordon Freeman move, shoot, lift boxes, radiators, and people, throw them around, and just do—well, whatever it is that he does—was a staggering blow to the boundaries of what many thought was currently possible in games. Epic scale and visual niceties aside, *Half-Life 2*'s shocking coup de grace comes in the all-too-tangible form of its intricate physics engine.

Armed with an experimental grappling gun, Freeman can manipulate nearly any object in his immediate surroundings for limitless emergent gameplay potential. Lift an enemy soldier by his ankles and players almost feel the floppy weight of a human skeletal system; bash him against the neighboring wall a couple of times and cringe at the in-your-face realism. Grab pieces of furniture and blockade a door to impede the chase of incoming shock troopers. Battle huge mechanized spiders in an urban sandbox textured with complex, lifelike physics. It's fantastic.

Whether *Half-Life 2* will see release on the Xbox has yet to be officially confirmed by Microsoft, but Valve has brightened the lives of many Xbox owners by saying that it has "concrete plans to release *Half-Life 2* for the Xbox."

E3 Declared Satanic

To the surprise of no one, the 700 Club recently posted an article on cbn.org condemning E3 as an expo full of "witches and vampires" enticing "passers-by to stop and play." Apparently, the 700 Club was appalled by *Grand Theft Auto III*, and cited gameplay instances where players can "rape a prostitute in a car...then hit her repeatedly with a golf club." Along with Congressman Joe Baca, the 700 Club wants to criminalize the sale of violent games to minors.

BAN ON VIOLENT GAMES STRUCK DOWN

A federal court ruled recently that an ordinance limiting children's access to violent videogames was unconstitutional.

The St. Louis County Council had enacted the ordinance in 2000, which required children under 17 to obtain parental consent before they bought violent or sexually explicit videogames, or played arcade games deemed violent or sexually explicit. The law was quickly challenged by the Washington-based action group Interactive Digital Software Association and never implemented.

Initially, the ordinance had been upheld by U.S. District Judge Stephen Limbaugh. *CNN* reported that in his decision, Limbaugh said St. Louis County "had a compelling interest in protecting the physical and emotional health of its children and helping parents look out for their children's well being."

Upon appeal, three judges ruling from the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the ordinance was unconstitutional, as it violates the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. "Whether we believe the advent of violent videogames adds anything to value of society is irrelevant. Guided by the First Amendment, we are obliged to recognize that they are as much entitled to the protection of free speech as the best of literature," Judge Morris S. Arnold wrote.

Douglas Lowenstein, the IDSA's president, called the Court's decision "a total and unambiguous affirmation of our position that videogames have the same constitutional status as a painting, a film, or a book," Web site MSNBC.com reported. Lowenstein's group acted as the lead plaintiff against the law.

Retailers in Missouri had also protested the law, MSNBC.com said, as it would have required store clerks to make judgements as to who was qualified to buy certain games.

D&D: Heroes X-clusive

Originally a multiplatform release for all three consoles, Atari's *D&D: Heroes* has recently gone the way of Xbox exclusivity. This four-player hack-'n-slash comes out late this year.

Auto Modellista on Xbox

Retailers Electronics Boutique and Gamestop have had Capcom's cel-shaded, online racer *Auto Modellista* on their release lists for some time. Capcom refused comment at press time.

Megaton Alliance

Criterion Software, makers of RenderWare middleware technology, and 3D software giant Discreet have entered into a strategic alliance to rule the universe—and make better tools.

GAMEPAD

Bang, you're dead. *Xbox Nation* explores videogaming's full clip.

Words : Jason Brookes Illustration : Andre Sibayan

We love shooting things. It feels good. As kids, we loved firing our slingshots at tin cans on the garden fence. (Or, regrettably, at an annoying younger brother and the neighbor's cat.) As a nation and as a culture, we celebrate those who make a habit of shooting things, from macho, gunslinging bounty hunters, to Mafia dons, to the armed forces who protect us from "evildoers." Guns possess a power that's ultimately mightier than human beings. And this makes them irresistible to videogame designers.

So perhaps it's no surprise that the pure, visceral pleasure of shooting things has remained the backbone of videogames since *Space Invaders* shuffled menacingly across the screen 25 years ago. And yet, we've come a long way from the simple pleasures of *Galaga*. In fact, this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo provided enough evidence that shooting games are no longer just a subgenre, they're virtually leading the charge in the pursuit of ever more realistic worlds and, most crucially, more realistic ways of killing.

While gamers continue to lap it up, this relentless push into realism could well create an impasse on videogaming's increasingly sketchy moral ground. The reasons are obvious. As technology advances through future iterations of hardware, a debate that has raged for years will intensify. And it won't just concern what's morally acceptable to depict in a videogame— what juicy, gratuitous delights await in *Grand Theft Auto IV* or *V*, for example. It will also take in what we, as players, can physically and emotionally stomach, and perhaps more disturbingly, how such experiences will affect us.

Developers are only just peering into this deep abyss. Despite the huge leaps gaming technology has seen in the past decade, it's still easy to make a clear distinction between the pixels on screen and the real world around you (which has undoubtedly protected videogaming from the ravages of greater censorship). But this differentiation is getting harder.

As gameplay continues to evolve at a slower pace than technology, develop-

ers are constantly striving to max out graphical innovations rather than forge new styles of play. So the carrot on the end of the stick, for the foreseeable future at least, is ever more intense, realistic, and rewarding consequences for your actions. Cutting-edge Xbox titles *Splinter Cell* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* certainly aren't for the faint of heart, but they're walks in the park compared to what's surely coming down the line.

What can we expect when our interaction with these experiences creates a

convincing fabrication of reality? Will the impact of shooting and killing what look like real people—people who can laugh and cry and scream in terror like real human beings—go beyond rewarding visceral pleasure centers in the brain, and start, quite literally, messing

with our heads? Or worse still, the heads of those already dangerously close to the edge?

For a nation that's already obsessed with guns, this should be food for thought. Michael Moore's controversial film *Bowling for Columbine* depicts an America motivated by fear and gripped by gun violence; an America where we are 129 times more likely to be killed by a gun than someone living in Japan. Is this cultural distinction now ominously reflected by the direction videogames have taken?

…an America where we are **129 times more likely to be killed** by a gun than someone living in Japan.

As we prepare to experience a new era of ultrarealistic videogames, should we simply be excited about slipping deeply into worlds that border on reality? Or are there unforseen dangers lurking ahead? Perhaps these are questions we'd be wise to ask...

The Fight For Xbox 2

Rumors are spreading fast that Microsoft will ditch Nvidia as chip manufacturer for Xbox 2, in favor of ATI. Xbox represents between 10 and 20 percent of Nvidia's total revenue, but analysts said financial terms of the relationship haven't always favored Nvidia. Adding to the complexity is the fact that ATI currently manufactures the graphics chipset for Nintendo's GameCube. A formal announcement from Microsoft isn't expected until later this year—more as it comes.

Quiddich & Quaaludes

J.K. Rowling's fictional sport Quidditch, seen in the *Harry Potter* novels and brought to videogame life by Electronic Arts in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,* will get its turn in the sun with *Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup.* The game, which involves seven-player, broomstick-riding teams and four balls in play at one time, should see release on Xbox later this year. Nuclear physicists would be hard-pressed to explain the game's rules, but suffice it to say *Quidditch* contains elements of hockey, polo, and, possibly, horse diving. Whether its witchcraft will be deemed "immoral" by the CBN remains to be seen (see *Satanic* p.16).

After 12 years, videogame mainstay 3DO finally calls it quits

Trip Hawkins' 3DO company folded like a house of cards, yet another victim of the ever-imploding videogame market. The company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in late May, with massive layoffs of 3DO employees and a plummeting of stock shares following shortly after the announcement.

"While we hope that this [bankruptcy] news will generate additional opportunities," Hawkins said, "At this point we are focused on the sale of the entire company or the sale of its assets."

Hawkins founded the company in 1991, and 3DO released a short-lived and highly expensive console in 1993. After the console failed, Hawkins turned 3DO into a platform agnostic publisher and developer. The company became best known for its *Army Men* and *High Heat* baseball games.

Shrinking sales and reduced revenues forced Hawkins to invest his own money to stabilize 3DO, *The Oakland Times* reported. It's estimated that during the company's lean years, Hawkins may have sunk as much as $20 million dollars into 3DO.

The now defunct 3DO leaves some unpublished titles behind, including the Xbox games *Street Racing Syndicate* and *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.* It's expected these games, and 3DO's other licensed properties, will be sold off wholly or piecemeal shortly.

HACKING THE XBOX

Dr. Andrew Huang–best known for his work in discovering secrets in the Xbox hardware and who has given tips to gamers on how to swap out a hard drive or boot Linux on an Xbox console–has published a book titled *Hacking the Xbox.* The book is intended to be an introduction to "hardware hacking," or fiddling with the guts of an electronic device to determine what makes it tick.

So those looking for information about copying games or artificially boosting Xbox Live abilities can go back to Googling—*Hacking the Xbox* isn't going to be much use for those purposes. Instead, Huang describes his methodology for researching and modifying his Xboxes, including dunking an entire unit's worth of silicon into sulfuric acid (*Xbox Nation* recommends not trying this one at home, or anywhere else for that matter). Because of the Xbox's similarities with the run-of-the-mill PC, the techniques

described can be applied to a broad range of hardware to better understand their inner workings.

Ethical and legal concerns are explored as well, including an excellent chapter written by Lee Tien, an attorney from the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Elsewhere, Huang is careful not to tread too heavily on the toes of our favorite console's parent company, legally or otherwise, although interviewees weren't always as diplomatic.

A minor quibble about the book is the disparity between the previous knowledge that readers will bring with them. It's often unclear whether Huang is writing to a novice or expert audience, and sometimes it seems as if the author himself is not sure. A person who knows what "Netlist parity checks" are probably wouldn't need an appendix on soldering techniques, yet a casual reader would be able to benefit from the description between "hardware description language" and
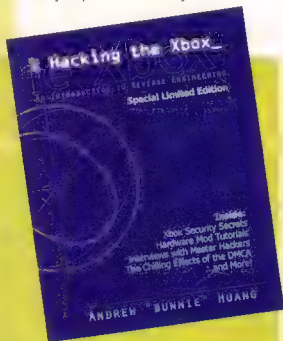
software programming.

Huang also includes step-by-step projects to help readers examine their Xboxes and interviews with several key members of the growing Xbox hacking community.

Hacking the Xbox is currently available exclusively from the Web site www.hackingthexbox.com for $24.99. Xenatera Press is already planning a second run. For future versions, a larger publisher has offered to print and presumably distribute it, but the specifics have not yet been announced.

Making Even More Movies...

Developer Legaba is working on an Xbox title that will let players make their own dinosaur movie. It's tentatively titled (what else?) *Dinosaur Movie-Maker* and will release in spring 2004.

Johnny (No More) Drama

Hip adventure hero Johnny Drama, star of Sierra's cool cel-shaded game *Johnny Drama* has been given the ax. Sierra insiders said the game was all style and no substance.

Xbox Documentary

FilmOasis, Inc., a Los Angeles-based production company exposes what it takes to make a game for Microsoft in their one-hour program, *The X FACTOR: Inside Microsoft's Xbox.* Google it.

CONFORMITY IS SUCH AN UGLY WORD

Words Per Second

A talking arcade cabinet, a missing female game designer, and an adult obsession. No this isn't the latest Haruki Murakami novel—these are just a few elements that make up *Lucky Wander Boy*, the debut novel by D.B. Weiss.

Lucky does for obsessive game nerds what Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* did for greasy audiophiles back in the mid-'90s. The awkward "Engrish" title refers to a fictional game that serves not just as an unattainable Holy Grail for Adam Pennyman, the book's nearing-30 protagonist, but also as a reflection to his own meandering existence. Littered with a series of uncanny events and a collection of insightful essays on everything from *Pac-Man* and *Frogger* to *Microsurgeon* on the Intellivision, *Lucky* is a profound, nostalgic must-read for any gamer who has ventured beyond the "the zone" and back.

Weiss, a graduate of the famed Iowa Writers' Workshop, began developing ideas for a game-related novel in 1998, when he noted the dearth of serious fiction about videogames in the modern canon. "Games deserve the kind of close and deep attention afforded to everything from novels to music to movies...they exert just as powerful a hold over those who play them," he says. Weiss, a serious *Halo* player, is currently working on his second novel, which is set in the 17th century. Weiss says: "I just can't seem to come up with a videogame angle for it."

ARGO-NOT

Argonaut's *Malice* meets its maker, *Orchid* gets pruned

UK developer Argonaut announced that projects *Malice* and *Orchid* have been dropped by their respective publishers Vivendi and Namco Hometek.

This comes as a heavy blow to the London-based company. The platformer *Malice* had been scheduled as an Xbox launch title, but was delayed numerous times. When asked for comment, CEO Jez San stated: "[Vivendi/Universal] owns a number of its own character games like *Crash Bandicoot*, *Spyro the Dragon*, and so on, so when looking at its portfolio and having inherited all of Sierra's games [due to Sierra recently folding into Vivendi], it decided it had enough of its own properties. [Dropping *Malice*] was purely a financial decision."

Insiders estimate *Malice* may have cost upwards of $13.5 million to create. It was in development since before Xbox's launch, and shown numerous times at the yearly E3 trade show. Those who played the game reported poor framerates, boring platformer action, and stilted animations. When a preview version of the game emerged early this year, it was clear that work still needed to be done. *Malice,* despite boasting features such as "fully parametric Phong shading with pervasive bump-mapping" and "superhigh detailed characters with weighted soft-skinning," as well as voice work from Gwen Stefani of No Doubt, sported gameplay that was "highly problematic," to say the least.

According to San, the game was finished for Sierra back in January, but upon Vivendi's takeover, it was requested that *Malice* be reworked for a younger audience. Vivendi thought the content was a little too complex, and so the 90-odd finished levels had to be edited to please the publisher.

Also a victim of the ax was the eagerly awaited *Orchid*, a comic-book scrolling beat-'em-up boasting a free-combo system and featuring voices of Lisa Arturo from *American Pie 2* and Tamara Mello from *She's All That*.

The game was to be published by Namco, but in San's own words, "Some changes were requested, which we costed and told them: 'This is going to cost a lot; do you still want to do it?' and we got a 'no' from them."

Although both of these titles are off the radar, with only *Malice* still available for publisher pick-up on Xbox and PlayStation 2, San claims Argonaut is very healthy, with more than $11 million in the bank and a strong focus on selling its new titles.

One of the new titles, however, will not be a sequel to *Kung Fu Chaos*. The

Controller-S on a Mac

Darrell Walisser has produced a free driver that lets the Mac OS X use a controller-S Head over to http://homepage.mac.com/walisser/xboxhid-driver/ for the goods.

Xbox 1.5 rumors linger

British Web site *The Register* has reported rumors that MS will launch a smaller Japanese version of the Xbox to coincide with the release of *True Fantasy Online* later this year.

Xbox sponsors rock festival

Lollapalooza founder and Jane's Addiction vocalist Perry Farrell loves Xbox. So much so that he's partnering up with MS to deliver Xbox gaming "pavilions" at Lolla '03 this summer.

The Will Wright Show

Me rixey!

party-cum-beat-'em-up game did not sell enough to warrant a sequel. Its creator, the Just Add Monsters team, is now working on an entirely original property.

Argonaut still has the Xbox Live-enabled Carve in the pipeline. Carve, a jet-ski game, boasts realistic water physics and the innovative use of a skier's rear jet-stream as a way of slowing down opposing players.

Other Argonaut titles include SWAT: Global Strike Team, a squad-based first-person shooter for Xbox and PS2, which features downloadable content and is still signed to Vivendi; Lego Bionicle, which is an all-major-platforms title for EA; and Powerdrome, an unsigned update to a 16-bit classic credited for inspiring WipeOut.

Argonaut is also now said to be

pitching a game based on the Catwoman film, which is scheduled for release in 2004, and stars Halle Berry as the leather-clad heroine and Owen Wilson as a pursuing detective.

The Hollywood Reporter has revealed that Will Wright, creator of the hit franchise The Sims, has signed a development deal with Fox Broadcasting. The agreement gives the Fox network first-look rights at an original TV show conceived by Wright. The Hollywood Reporter also said that whatever form this potential TV series may take, the show will definitely not be based on a videogame. "I'd like to fast-forward into the future a bit and explore how machines and artificial intelligence will impact human beings and how robots will help us define ourselves," says Wright. "The trick is going to be to hook a mass audience with a new concept and then Trojan-horse these ideas into the show."

We say: Bring it on.

Doom III is official for Xbox
To the surprise of no one, first-person technologists id Software officially confirmed at E3 this year that Doom III is indeed Xbox bound. The game will see release "when it's done."

Timberlake hearts Xbox
Justin Timberlake of boy band 'N Sync recently toured MS' game studios in Redmond, WA, for a first-hand look at Halo 2. According to witnesses, Timberlake plays a mean game of Halo.

Fixin' for Fable
Check out www.fablegame.com for all the latest news on the long-awaited Xbox RPG Fable. The site will be updated frequently from now until the game's release next spring.

POP QUIZ

Blizzard's Bill Roper on *Starcraft: Ghost* and the art of being nude

Each issue, *Xbox Nation* sits face-to-face with a real-life gaming wizard to confabulate about the serious art of making fun videogames. The interview format is different, but straightforward. We show a designer a series of in-game screenshots and let him or her tell us not only the name of the game, but its relevance to his or her own body of work. Hopefully, the discussion of external influences will provide insight on the interviewee's design philosophies and beliefs. Often it seems the best designers are also among the most talkative and opinionated in the industry.

This month, we pop the quiz on Bill Roper, vice president of Blizzard North and co-conspirator on many excellent games, to query him on *Starcraft: Ghost*, his latest console project slated for release on the Xbox sometime next year. Roper, whose game design career began in the early '90s as a voice actor for *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, has been instrumental in defining the current state of real-time strategy games in the PC arena. Now, he hopes *Ghost*, a third-person stealth action shooter, will do for consoles what *Warcraft* did for PCs—that is, to take the foundation set by forerunners like *Metal Gear Solid 2* and *Splinter Cell*, and give the genre a much-needed kick-in-the-pants.

Bill Roper

Title: Vice President, Blizzard North

Current Xbox project: *Starcraft: Ghost*

Past Projects: *Warcraft* (PC), *Warcraft II* (PC), *Warcraft III* (PC), *Starcraft* (PC, N64), *Diablo* (PC), *Diablo II* (PC)

Dune II

Publisher: Virgin Games

Developer: Westwood Studios

Platform: PC, Sega Genesis

Year: 1992

Xbox Nation: We're sure you're familiar with the first game we're going to show.

Bill Roper: [Laughing] Yeah! Oh man, *Dune II* was just so awesome. This is one of those games I played before I ever worked at Blizzard—keep in mind I was a total game-a-holic—this game was so brilliant and incredible. Along with *Herzog Zwei*, it really was the genesis of the real-time strategy genre. It introduced the concept of "constraints," where you had to do certain things, like build concrete pads first in order to then build on top of that. So you had to visualize and place your buildings' space first.

XBN: *Dune II* is commonly hailed as being highly ahead of its time.

Roper: It really is one of the few games you look at and you think, "This game defined that genre." It's set so many of the now accepted mechanics for real-time strategy games—resource gathering, building construction, units coming out of structures. Of course, there's been a ton of stuff that's gone on from there...

XBN: Doesn't Blizzard pretty much rule the RTS genre these days?

Roper: Well the thing that was really exciting through the early and mid-'90s was going back and forth with Westwood on games. *Dune II*, then we did *Warcraft*, then they did *Command & Conquer*, then we had *Warcraft II*—I never felt like it was a competition. It was more like we were appealing to similar but, at times, different audiences. They always had the high-tech near-future military theme, whereas we were about fantasy settings and then with *Starcraft*, we were set in outer space. We were building off what each other did, bringing more and more people into playing RTS games. [Westwood] had created this great genre, and we just couldn't believe nobody else was taking advantage of it.

XBN: So how much of *Warcraft* came directly out of *Dune II*? Was it basically the same game set in a fantasy world?

Roper: Well the directly part is that we recognized Westwood had created this entirely new genre. I have a very distinct memory of launching the original *Warcraft* and we were talking with our PR person

who wasn't a big gamer, and having this discussion where it's like, "Well, this is what's really different about *Warcraft*. Yes it is a strategy game, but turn-based is like chess, whereas RTS is we're both moving pieces around at the same time, as fast as we can." We just couldn't believe nobody was capitalizing on this new genre. So we took this great concept Westwood came up with, and added multi-player to up the ante.
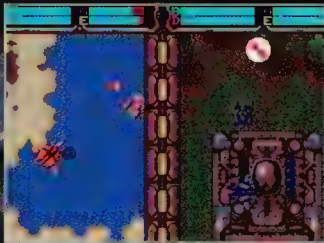
Herzog Zwei

Publisher: Techno Soft

Developer: Techno Soft

Platform: Sega Genesis

Year: 1990

Roper: Ah yes, *Herzog Zwei*. Unfortunately, I never got to play this game.

XBN: We picked *Herzog*, not only because it's probably the very first RTS game ever made, but also because it's a great RTS game on consoles. How much of the RTS experience is user interface? Can consoles overcome their lack of a mouse and keyboard to feature an RTS title that's just as robust as a PC one?

Roper: A lot of the gameplay that's evolved around the RTS, such as selecting lots of units rapidly and setting areas, are all things that can get kind of difficult with a joypad. What it's going to take is for someone to decide that they want to develop an RTS for the console, and really take consideration of the special needs of the controller. We did a lot of streamlining to the controls when we brought *Starcraft* to the Nintendo 64.

XBN: Yeah, *Starcraft 64* was a decent port, but what hurt the game was that you had to play in splitscreen mode against an opponent. With the Xbox online via Live, is Blizzard interested in making a console-specific RTS—perhaps a side-story for one of the *Warcraft* or *Starcraft* games?

Roper: Right now, our console focus is *Ghost*. We haven't had a lot of discussion about doing a new RTS on the Xbox, but certainly, we recognize that multiplayer is what keeps our RTS games alive. Now we're starting to see the consoles get the ability to offer downloadable content, and we could certainly see the possibility of using the talk-over-wire systems for coordinating team attacks. Though we don't have any specific plans as of yet, the console platform is now a lot more in-line with what we've valued in the past. Multiplayer has always been important for us.

Dark Reign

Publisher: Activision

Developer: Activision

Platform: PC

Year: 1997

XBN: Here's a twist—the guys who worked on this game are currently working on a different style of the RTS game called *Full Spectrum Warrior*. This is a game they released back in '97.

Roper: Yeah, I know I've played this. Oh man...this is, uh...I know I've played this. This game had a lot of really specific commands you could give your guys. You could set patrol patterns and different stuff. Man, I cannot remember what it's called.

XBN: It's *Dark Reign*. We picked this title for its total refinement and extension of what *Starcraft* basically picked up from the *Dune II* concept. At the time, it was the ultimate evolution of the 2D RTS game.

Roper: Ah, that's right—*Dark Reign*. It was a very cool and sophisticated game. It put a lot of control into players' hands.

XBN: Do you think the complexity of the game backfired? It never really achieved mass popularity.

Roper: I do think that's probably the reason. There's a certain amount of control that people get excited about and use, but when you cross over that, then you're requiring too much of the player to be successful. It's a fine line to cross and it's difficult. There are a lot of things we automate in *Starcraft*, and people go "Well I want my guy to do this or that," and it's like, well we could make the A.I. less automatic, but once you go past a certain point, you start to lose that broader market of players. So you end up making a game that's really appealing to just the core gamer.

XBN: Basically, all of South Korea isn't playing *Dark Reign* right now—they're having televised matches of *Starcraft* instead.

Roper: Right. The beauty of *Starcraft* is that everybody can play it, but only a few people can play it really well at that highly competitive level. I mean, I can go play baseball—throw the ball and hit it—but I can't do it like [Barry] Bonds, so I'm enamored by watching someone really good play this game called baseball. So there was less of that sort of connectivity for the mainstream with *Dark Reign*, since it was so complex to begin with.

Splinter Cell

Publisher:	Ubi Soft
Developer:	Ubi Soft
Platform:	Xbox, PlayStation 2, GameCube
Year:	2002

Roper: Ah yes, *Splinter Cell*. Great game.

XBN: What did this game do right (and wrong), and how has *Starcraft: Ghost* been influenced by *Splinter Cell*?
Roper: Surely what *Splinter Cell* shows is that stealthy tactical action has a big audience. They really pushed the stealth elements in this game. *Splinter Cell* is a game best played in the shadows. I think there are elements of that in *Ghost*, and we're constantly playing with how much of that pure stealth gameplay we want in *Ghost*. I know we don't want nearly as much as there is in *Splinter Cell*.

XBN: Is *Splinter Cell* too stealthy?
Roper: I like the stealthy elements, but again, [*Splinter Cell*] kind of pushes towards that core gamer audience, because it was so stealthy, there was little margin for error. Like if I don't time this stealth maneuver just right, then I've got to start all over again. We'd like to be more forgiving.

XBN: So what gameplay elements will *Ghost* take from *Splinter Cell*?
Roper: Well, I like how they gave Sam a lot of different maneuvers so players can try and solve the "puzzle" of the level environment. For *Ghost*, we want to reward the player by putting them through a stealthy section of a level—it's really tense and you're constantly hunkered down—and then at the end of that, they get into this hangar bay and jump into this huge Goliath and blow the hell out of a bunch of stuff. It's like, I've been pent up for 40 minutes, so this is my big release. That five minutes of pure shooter time can really offset the stealth elements. A lot of people need this release.

XBN: Much of *Splinter Cell*'s gameplay is enabled by its level designs. Will this also be the case in *Ghost*?
Roper: Environment is really vital in this type of game. You don't want the answer to every scenario to be, "Well, I used my sniper rifle and killed the guy." One of the best games that incorporates all this is *Metal Gear Solid 2*. I remember getting near the end of that game, and by that point I've had a mission that was sniper-rifle focused, and one where I had to

find heartbeats, and I've collected all this stuff. So I'm near the end of the game I think, "So what are they going to do that's different?" And then suddenly I'm nude, running around covering myself up. Now, it's all about having nothing! So when you ended up at the very end with just a samurai sword, it felt incredible just to have this one weapon, even though it was a crappy melee weapon!

Vampire: The Masquerade

Publisher:	Activision
Developer:	Nihilistic
Platform:	PC
Year:	2000

Roper: Ah of course, Nihilistic. I played this right when it came out. The reason why we chose Nihilistic as the developer for *Ghost* goes way back to original Blizzard ties. Their head technology guy used to work at Blizzard. So when they were working on *Vampire*, we checked it out and thought it was great technology. [Blizzard] has been wanting to get back into consoles for a while, but we didn't want to do the whole project by ourselves. So when Nihilistic finished *Vampire*, they expressed interest in doing a console game too, but they were looking to work within an established intellectual property. So it was just serendipitous timing really.

XBN: Were you guys worried that having just finished an RPG on the PC, Nihilistic wasn't going to adapt well to developing an action game on the console?
Roper: Well, not really. Sure, you always have some concern when somebody is trying something new, but people looked at Blizzard and said, "Well you guys do RTS games, why are you doing an online RPG, what's this *Diablo* thing?" We've done a ton of different games. We never felt that we weren't going to be able to do *Warcraft* because what we'd done before that was *Rock 'n Roll Racing*, *Lost Vikings*, and *Blackthorne*, which were a racing game, a puzzle game, and a side-scrolling action game. If you think that there are good game-design ideas there, if they've got a good handle on how to build out interesting gameplay, those are really the bigger challenges than jumping genres. We liked the work Nihilistic had done on *Vampire*, plus we knew that *Ghost* would be a jointly developed game. We could never just hand over our license to just anybody, and say "Well you just go do something and send us a check later." At Blizzard, we're very protective of every one of our licenses.

Mixmaster X

Microsoft unveiled its new plan for world domination at E3 in the form of the *Xbox Musical Mixer*.

This package, which holds a fall release date and a $39.99 price tag, comes bundled with a microphone. *Mixer* will perform multiple functions, allowing players to share digital photos and music stored on a PC or download movies and music from them, make slideshows, and go karaoke crazy via the microphone.

The karaoke portion of *Mixer* will include a list of preset songs to sing over (read: B-52's "Love Shack"). It will also be possible to sing along to any song off any CD, as the *Mixer* has the ability to mute vocal tracks. All jams can be recorded to the Xbox hard drive and listened to time and again. Microsoft Trojan Horse, phase two, in full effect.

GAIDEN OF EDEN

Tecmo unleashes *Dead or Alive: Online*, *Ninja Gaiden* on masses

Amid the scantily clad models parading around at its booth during May's Electronic Entertainment Expo, Tecmo proved it had substance to match its style aplenty. The Japanese publisher unveiled the world's first 3D online fighter in *Dead or Alive: Online*, and gave *Xbox Nation* an in-depth look at the highly anticipated action game *Ninja Gaiden*.

Both Xbox-exclusive titles are being developed by Tecmo's Team Ninja. *Dead or Alive: Online*, according to Team Ninja head Tomonobu Itagaki, will be a compilation of sorts, combining the Sega Saturn version of the original 3D fighter *Dead or Alive* plus the Sega Dreamcast version of *Dead or Alive 2*. Both games will be improved, graphically, for Xbox, Itagaki said, and will feature competitive play via Xbox Live.

"I'm sick and tired of everyone going multiplatform and taking the easy way out," Itagaki said. "I wanted to show the power of Xbox with *Dead or Alive: Online*. We have used the *Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball* engine for *Dead or Alive: Online*, so it's better than *Dead or Alive 3*."

In addition to the improved graphics, Itagaki said this iteration of *Dead or Alive* will contain new costumes for some of the fighters, revamped arenas, and new scenes that help to better explain the relationship between the game's characters. The game also features full voice chat support and will contain an offline mode. It's expected *DOA: Online* will see release sometime this fall.

Online was only available as a video, but Itagaki showed off a playable version of *Ninja Gaiden*, complete with

protagonist Ryu Hayabusa performing wall-climbs, acrobatic sword attacks, and a host of flips and slides, as well as battling enemies both humanoid and supernatural. According to Itagaki, *Gaiden* will be a sequel of sorts to the other games in the series. "This is the story of Ryu Hayabusa becoming a full-blown, mature ninja striving to become master."

In this new *Gaiden*, Hayabusa will seek revenge against the villainous Vigor Empire for the death of his clan. Hayabusa can strike his foes with various swords, nunchukus, throwing stars, as

DEAD OR ALIVE Online

Lobo's Got Game

Kemco plans to release a *Lobo* Xbox game sometime in 2004. Comic fans will recognize Lobo as a crazed, intergalactic bounty hunter who destroyed his home planet.

Acclaim: Get Comical!

Expect Acclaim to develop and publish games based on Archangel Studios' *The Red Star* and DC Comics' *100 Bullets*. Both comic-book-based titles should hit Xbox next year.

THQ Picks On Pixar

Two upcoming Pixar flicks, *The Incredibles* and *Cars*, have been snatched up by THQ. Games for these two animated movies should be out by the time Xbox 2 rears its head.

"Tasteless" ceased to have any meaning with the release of the arcade game *Boong-Ga Boong-Ga.*

Boong-Ga simulates, quite literally, anal penetration. Although the game is translated into English as "*Spank 'Em*," players are required to thrust a plastic finger into a pair of buttocks, albeit jeans-clad buttocks. An on-screen character reacts to each invasion with screams and grimaces; players can opt to assault one of eight characters including an ex-boy- or girlfriend, a gangster, child molester, gold digger, mother-in-law, con artist, or prostitute. After the vigorous poking ends, players are rewarded with a card that rates or explains their sexual behavior. The harder the jabs and pokes, the more virile the game's player.

"This is a fun game of spanking the peopple [sic] that make your life miserable," a press release for the game proclaims. "When you spank the character that you choose to punish, the face expression of the character will change as they scream and twitch in pain. The funny face expressions will make people laugh and relieve the stress."

The game was developed by Korean game company Taff, and is being distributed in Japan. May God have mercy on our rear ends.

well as a bow-and-arrow to eliminate enemies at a distance. Players control Hayabusa with one analog stick and issue attacks and jump via gameplay buttons. "Our camera A.I. is very clever," Itagaki said. "For most games like this, you would have to use one thumbstick to control the camera. Here, I am using only one thumb to control the character."

In addition to spectacular graphics and frenzied battles, Tecmo also

promises *Gaiden* will contain a "revolutionary new Xbox Live compatible element." This element has yet to be revealed, but a recent press release on the game stated, "the Xbox Live feature will be like nothing gamers have ever experienced before."

Suffice it to say, *Gaiden* was one of the most impressive games shown at E3. It is slated to arrive on store shelves for the holiday season.

Full Spectrum Winner

THQ pulled off a major coup with its *Full Spectrum Warrior* won the Game Critics Award for Best Original Game at May's E3. For more *Spectrum* news, turn to page 066.

More E3 Awards

Other Xbox games winning Game Critics Awards for the 2003 E3 show were *Halo 2* (best console game), *Prince of Persia* (best action/adventure), and *Fable* (best RPG).

Halo 2 Movie

In case you've been dead, asleep, or dead asleep under a rock, Bungie's released a movie for *Halo 2*. Go to http://halo.bungie.net/ to see it, or be out-dorked by your friends.

EMULATION NATION

Inspired by *Enter the Matrix* and *The Italian Job* in this issue's reviews section, *Xbox Nation* explores the dark underbelly of retro movie-license gaming on Xbox

3 NINJAS KICKBACK

The Facts

Title: *3 Ninjas Kickback*
Publisher: Sony Imagesoft
Developer: Malibu Interactive
Players: 1-2
Platform: Super Nintendo
Original release: 1995

Premise: Based on the family-oriented action-comedy flick of the same name, players relive the antics of Colt, Rocky, and Tum-Tum—suburban ninja kids on a quest to save gramps from bad men in a bad land. Zany, nonsensical platform antics ensue.

Trivia: *3 Ninjas Kickback* (the motion picture) features underrated Vietnamese actor Dustin Nguyen (*21 Jump Street*, *V.I.P.*, *SeaQuest DSV*) as Glam, an antagonist that's as goofy as his name suggests. Tragically, Nguyen's likeliness in the game is—like much of his acting career post-*21 Jump Street*—downright pitiful. For shame.

Just when you thought it was safe to pick up videogames based on red-hot movie licenses, *Enter the Matrix* (see review on page 078) comes shambling along to reinstate caution and paranoia for self-respecting gamers everywhere. But the state of movie-to-game affairs used to be worse. A lot worse.

A few generations ago, developers could take the vitality of a movie license, compress it into a generic *Mario*-derived platforming hell, and ship it out the door with little commercial backlash. Take, for instance, *3 Ninjas Kickback*, Emulation Nation's dodgy pick-of-the-month.

While neither of the two *3 Ninjas* flicks combined could hold a candle to, say, a four-hour real-estate seminar, the movie had its G-rated moments. How the events of the film get translated into this vine-swinging, boulder-dodging, yen-collecting platform travesty is where things get a bit

cloudy. It's not that *Kickback* is particularly crap as a game; remove the creepy mugs of Rocky, Colt, and Tum-Tum (see below), and it's a fairly solid, if uninspired 2D platformer. But, uh, why are we collecting yen again?

EA's recent *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* is an engaging romp, to be sure, but if it's the best example of a movie license game yet, then the industry has a long way to go.

SELECT PLAYER
ROCKY   COLT   TUM-TUM
■ Favorite line in the game from these adorable ninjas: "Argh! Murderize them!"
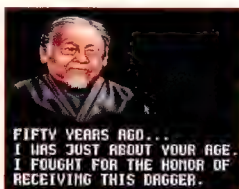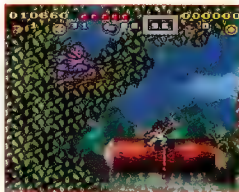
FIFTY YEARS AGO...
I WAS JUST ABOUT YOUR AGE.
I FOUGHT FOR THE HONOR OF
RECEIVING THIS DAGGER.
■ Victor Wong III (*Big Trouble in Little China*) speaks like a walking fortune cookie.

TOKYO TRIBE

Xbox Nation dials into Japan's slow-drip acceptance of Xbox Live

Clearly, Microsoft's current strategy in Japan is not a success. The company needs to find a different tack—a special something that demonstratively sets Xbox apart from the PlayStation 2 or GameCube. In America, that "something" is Xbox Live, Microsoft's integrated online gaming service. Microsoft has sold 350,000 Xbox Live starter kits in the first few months of availability, almost doubling its initial expectations. More important than the sales figures, however, is the perception. Xbox Live is something exclusive to Xbox. PlayStation 2 and GameCube don't have anything like it—and are unlikely to launch a comparable service anytime soon. Much of Microsoft's E3 presentation focused on affordable pricing, the XSN line of sports games, and core upgrades to the service's functionality and user-friendliness. Increasingly, Xbox's success is tied to the success of the Xbox Live service.

But in Japan, Xbox Live has been met with the same cold shoulder that greets almost anything Xbox related. A mere 24,000 copies of the startup kit have been sold since its January release. Given the general failure of anything Xbox related in Japan, this underwhelming performance should come as no surprise. But hell, 28,000 people shelled out nearly $200 to pick up *Tekki* (the Japanese *Steel Battalion*). Xbox has no "casual" fans in Japan. Any gamer who's picked up one of the big black behemoths is fairly hardcore, and probably interested in PC gaming to boot. Xbox Live might not be a system-selling success here, but surely current Xbox fans should be more interested. What went wrong?

The blame most likely lies at the feet of differences between the Japanese and American telecommunications industries. Though Microsoft's draconian "broadband or bust" policy has worked in the United States, the state of Japanese broadband
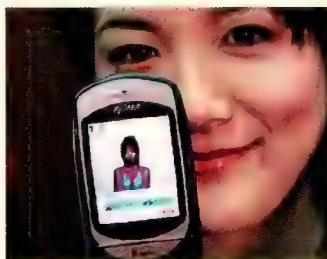
is quite different from that of the States. It's not that broadband service isn't available; on the contrary, broadband is now available most anywhere. It's that broadband hasn't been available. Before 2001, high-speed internet service wasn't available outside of Tokyo and Osaka. In late 2001, NTT (Japan's telecommunications monopoly) had its telephone lines deregulated, and ADSL service exploded across Japan. Anyone who wanted broadband could now sign up and, though response has been healthy, the countrywide broadband "explosion" has yet to materialize. Why isn't your average Japanese Internet user signing up?

One reason might be cost. Hooking up to the Internet in Japan is an expensive proposition. You

have to pay upfront just for the right to own and use a telephone, and it's not cheap, either. After World War II ravaged Japan's infrastructure, NTT instituted a 72,800 yen fee (about $600) on all new telephone-line installations. The infrastructure has long since been rebuilt, but the fee, not surprisingly, remains.

The huge initial cost just to use a telephone line has caused an increasing number of young Japanese

...have to pay upfront just for the right to own and use a telephone...

people to exclusively rely on portable telephones called keitais. Keitais are a generation or two ahead of portable phones in the United States and offer e-mail, Web-surfing, built-in MP3 players, cameras, and much more. Moreover, the cutthroat competition between keitai companies means there's no sign-up fee and that the phones themselves can be snagged
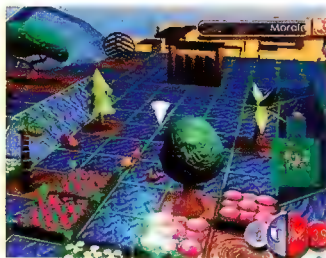
for dirt cheap, if not free.

But whether you use an expensive landline or an inexpensive keitai, you have to pay per-minute or per-packet connection charges to the Internet. Unlike in the United States, where local telephone calls are free, every call in Japan carries a per-minute charge. NTT charges 10 yen per 90 seconds, or about $4 an hour. In fact, ADSL service in Japan is marketed more as an "all-you-can-use" service than a speed-based service. Sure, says Yahoo Broadband, the 12-megabit downstream bandwidth is nice, but waittilya geddaload of this! No per-minute charges! But before you can enjoy all that abundant bandwidth, you must purchase the aforementioned landline. Most young 20-somethings, Xbox Live's target audience, are going to heavily think it over before taking the broadband plunge.

The ever-present issue of cost means that Internet usage in Japan has grown upon divergent evolutionary lines from the United States. Whereas the U.S.' free local calls and flat-rate pricing encouraged an always-on, shop-till-you-drop atmosphere of Internet

usage, Japan's ever-ticking money meter trained Internet users to get on, get what you need, and get off. Widespread keitai usage has led to a general low-graphic, utilitarian-site aesthetic. Japanese people are happy with their current style of Internet usage, and see no real reason to upgrade to broadband.

In a nutshell: Despite the now-widespread availability of broadband, Internet culture and usage in Japan is still lagging five to seven years behind the United States. Gamers in the States have been playing online since *Doom* supported 2400-baud modems. Meanwhile, the inescapable high cost of connecting to the Internet kept a similar community from forming in Japan during the 1990s. Online gaming is just not something people think about. It's not part of the gaming culture. Keitais ship with built-in support for Java gaming, and everyone's downloading single-player puzzle games. For Japanese people to change the habits they've learned—to adopt broadband—they'll need a reason to change the fundamental way they use and perceive the Internet. They'll need to see that killer

app—something they can only do with broadband.

Xbox Live is not that killer app. For all this talk about broadband adoption rates, per-minute connection charges, and cultural perceptions—when you get down to brass tacks, Xbox Live in Japan kinda sucks. The one interesting title, *Phantasy Star Online*, was packed in with the Xbox Live Starter Kit. That was a smart move. Less smart was following *Online* up with absolutely nothing at all.

Since the service launched five months ago, Japanese Xbox Live owners can currently play: *Whacked!*, *Capcom vs. SNK 2 EO*, *Muzzle Flash* (a military action game), and *Thousand Land* (a quirky puzzle action game). Why on Earth would anyone buy an Xbox Live starter kit to play these games, let alone endure the cost of setting up a broadband connection? The answer is, they wouldn't. And thus, they haven't.

So what can Microsoft do to increase Live's popularity in Japan? Though attracting new gamers might be difficult, increasing the adoption rate among current Xbox owners isn't an impossible task. The first, most obvious solution is simply to put out games that people would want to play online. *True Fantasy Live Online*, *Tekki Online*, and even *Halo 2* should all find a small-but-dedicated audience. Quality software—whether Japanese or American—is the first line of attack. Nobody wants to pay-to-play online crap, even if it is Japanese-developed.

The second cure to Xbox Live's Japanese woes is simply to wait. In another year or two, broadband will have found a larger audience, online attitudes will have begun to change, and the next generation of compelling Xbox Live software will be available. Fortunately, if there's one thing Microsoft Japan has learned to successfully cultivate, it's patience.

CONNECTED

Bad Engrish, Bad Candy, Sad Cats

The Tailor of a Cat—Cat Prin
http://www.petoffice.co.jp/catprin/english/

"Cats to become a rabbit should gather immediately now here." Bad headwear for cats plus Japanese-styled English combine to form the electronic juggernaut that is Petoffice.com. Thrill to see cute cats looking absolutely miserable in animal-themed headgear and remind yourself it's all just a dream from which you will one day wake.

Ultimate Bad Candy Web Site
http://www.bad-candy.com/old/bc3/

Mark and Ben are modern-day martyrs, suffering for the sins of greedy candy manufacturers across the globe. It's their lot in life to sample the ultimate in bad snack products (Fruit Salted Plum Suckers, anyone? Fizzy Milk?) and then rank their suffering on a scale of one to six. "We are superstars of the candy underworld!" their site proclaims. "Crusaders against ignoble treats!"

Trevor Van Meter.com
http://www.trevorvanmeter.com/flyguy/

Fly Guy's trippy black-and-white adventure takes him from a bus stop into the clouds, up past the heavens, through the seas, and eventually to, well, we shan't spoil the surprise. Soaring, flipping, popping little kids' balloons, rocking out with space aliens, Fly Guy really gets around, and this sort-of game will have you coming back time and again. Check it out or be damned!

Xlink Messenger
http://www.xboxlink.co.uk/index.php

For those who want to play Halo online, it's never been easier than with Xlink Messenger. This site walks you through all the necessary steps: downloading the files, logging on, and blasting away. There's a step-by-step guide to get you online that makes the process more simple than eating cake. We can't recommend this site enough.

Download Xbox Save Games
http://www.xbox-saves.com/

Can't be bothered to find every single DNA canister in Brute Force, or sick to death of replaying those soul-crushing races in Midnight Club 2? Head over to Xbox Saves for a comprehensive save file repository of nearly every Xbox game released to date. The catch is that short of modding your Xbox, you've got to order (from this Web site) an Xbox-to-PC adapter for $34.95.

VICE CITY ON XBOX

PlayStation 2 behemoths Grand Theft Auto III and its partner-in-crime, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, helped catapult videogames into the mainstream consciousness, and put the hit out on videogaming's kiddie image. Now, thanks to Auto, Mario's sleeping with the fishes.

Take-Two Interactive's CEO Jeff Lapin recently announced that in-house developer Rockstar plans to release a "significant" title for Xbox early next year.

Discontent with mere public relations vagaries, Xbox Nation delved into sources and discovered that not only is the mystery Xbox title last year's PS2 megahit Vice City, but that the game would see release as soon as this holiday season. Apparently, Rockstar plans to omit the words "grand," "theft," and "auto" in the title of Vice City on Xbox to get around Sony's exclusive lockdown on all things GTA.

Xbox's Vice City will be a direct port of the PC version of the game, sporting high-res graphics and custom soundtracks, as well as possible Xbox Live functionality. Meanwhile, the mouth-watering online sequel Grand Theft Auto IV, scheduled for release sometime in 2004, remains a PS2 exclusive.

Once a Prince…

Booby traps, sultans, and a very important hourglass. *Xbox Nation* **spends a long Arabian night with** *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time.*

Words - Evan Shamoon

The Electronics Entertainment Expo, with its protracted whirlwind of sound and fury, numbs the mind, body, and soul at nearly every step. Uncovering one's own sanity in this foggy, headache-inducing haze—let alone anything so pedestrian as a videogame—is a difficult task. It therefore speaks to a title's quality when, with minimal hype and a decidedly low-key demeanor, it simply demands attention. It has been nearly 15 years since Jordan Mechner's original *Prince of Persia* essentially reinvented the genre from which it sprung. With a slated release date of November 2003, the sequel looks to be doing the same for the here, the now, and the future.

There is something quite indefinable about *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. It extends to all forms of art and has been an essential part of every videogame to achieve classic status over the years. While the developers at Ubi Soft are able to speak lucidly and at great length about specific elements in their game—story, animation, gameplay—their words become decidedly staccato; blunted; and cryptic when it comes to describing this final, apparently indescribable piece of the puzzle. Seeing as the game is being produced in the heart of French Canada, it's difficult to resist the temptation to simply describe this something as a certain *je ne sais quoi* and be done with it. Alas

To rectify the situation, *Xbox Nation* pays a visit to Ubi Soft's quaint Montreal offices, where the energy surrounding the project quickly becomes evident Team members seem acutely aware that they are a part of something groundbreaking. There are no guns, no car chases, no laser-guided missiles; just a beautiful layered story-line, articulated through deep gameplay mechanics and a symbiotic relationship between the game's artfully calibrated control and an immersive, elegant narrative.
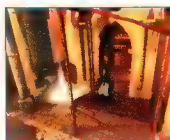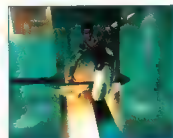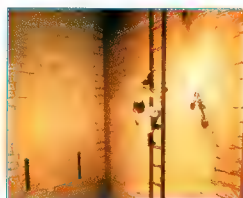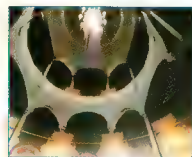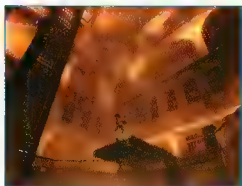
The Sands of Time will make use of both automated and manual camera options. "The camera will always be the main issue in videogames, especially third-person character-based games," says Producer Yannis Mallat

"At E3 2001, we met with Jordan [Mechner], and he didn't know at the time, but we'd already started on a pretty advanced mock-up," *Sands of Time* Producer Yannis Mallat says. "We all remember when he watched the mock-up—he was totally flabbergasted. So, for the whole team we were like, 'Okay, we've blown away the creator of the [series], and we have a full two years to make the game. This is cool ' And then we boosted."

And Mallat is right: *The Sands of Time* makes great first impressions. The atmosphere is gorgeous, evoking such fantasies as those described in classic Arabian folklore like *The Thousand and One Nights.* Regal, intri-cately constructed architecture and dry, windswept desert landscapes create a stunning backdrop for the game's acton, which concerns itself with a story steeped in bloodshed.

After leading the Persian army to victory in a longstanding war across the continent, a newly crowned Prince discovers an ancient hourglass and claims it as a trophy for his troops. The hourglass is mistakenly broken, the sands freed from within, and an evil curse is unleashed across the land—transforming all living creatures that cross its path into eminently killable monsters. The Prince, whose error let loose this evil and whose persona players assume at the start of the game, puts it upon himself to make things right.

See Prince Run

Sitting down with the game, the most immediately striking element at work here is what may be the finest character animation in any 3D videogame to date. In a medium where narrative actions are articulated as physical movements, this Prince is perhaps the most eloquent, expressive digital protagonist ever designed. Watching him creep carefully behind an unwitting guard—or, alternatively, scamper up said guard's chest and launch himself into the air, landing behind him as his sword does its duty

and his dagger extracts from the fallen enemy's body a handful of the ever-important Sands of Time (more on these later)—is an experience unto itself. Actually *making* him do these things borders on the sublime.

As is often the case with greatness, this level of interactive sophistication wasn't easy to achieve. "You'll hear from many videogame studios, 'We're using motion-captured animation, so our [character] is going to look great!'" Mallat asserts. "And, well, yeah, 'the move' is going to look great. But in videogames, you do not show moves, you *play* moves. So a great move with another great move right after it…if there is no coherent and fluid link between the two motion captures, then it's going to look crap."

After one motion-capture session, it became clear to the team that its project was going to require something more precise, more human. "Without hand animation, we're not really in control," confirms Patrice Desilets, the game's creative director, who points out that the only piece of motion capture that will actually make its way into the game is that used for the Prince's decidedly *non*interactive idle animation.

Of course, remarkable talent doesn't hurt either. "Our lead animator Alex [Drovin] is crazy. He would regularly come to me every day with three, sometimes four new animations… which is unheard of," Mallat says of his essentially self-taught lead animator, who produced the roughly 700 individual animations for the Prince alone.

Crucial is the relationship between Drovin and the game's lead A.I. programmer, Richard Dumas. Mallat says: "The Prince himself, as a variable, is a combination of animation and A.I. So, you need to take the best animator and the best A.I. guy and have them working together. That's obvious, but in real life, it's not always possible." Desilets describes the relationship between the two as being one of contrast and complement, Drovin being the free-spirited artist who "doesn't care about process and just wants to animate," while Dumas is constantly making sure that every animation, every move, fits into the larger scope of controller input, the level, and the game itself.

It's clear Mallat is vigilant about feel, and this is reflected in the approach the team took to its production cycle. "The main difference between videogames and any other entertainment medium is that [they are] interactive. And this is the only difference, but it is on this only difference

"So, you need to take **the best animator and the best A.I. guy** and have them working together."—Yannis Mallat

Live and Direct

The Xbox version of *The Sands of Time* will include exclusive online content. While Ubi Soft would not reveal its precise nature, phrases like "pretty groundbreaking" and "not just an online high-scores list" were tossed around. Here's the hint we got: "Use your imagination. The game is all about animation, gameplay, rewind—plus what we can do with Xbox Live…" There will also be an exclusive making-of documentary included with the Xbox version and, due to its increased horsepower, refined textures and character models, a framerate locked at 60fps (double that of its PS2 counterpart), as well 480p HDTV support.

that we are putting our business. [So] I do want a very solid first playable before building anything. And I'm not the only one in the industry to share this theory—in fact, it's not mine—but I do embrace it. [If] you're not satisfied with what you have in terms of control and camera system, then you have to work on that until you come up with something great before adding anything else. And this," he stresses, "is gameplay."

It's a fine point, but one that bears repeating. When asked what he is happiest with about the game, Mechner points to this byplay between control and animation. "It's that feeling of picking up the controller, moving it a little bit, and feeling that connection between you and this insanely acrobatic, agile character on the screen. That's what I was going for with *Prince 1*, back in the days when there were very few things that the character could do—just running and jumping. But the team has brought that sense to a real-time, next-generation game, where you're running up walls, you're doing a million

things at once, and all of it somehow flows naturally from that controller."

Prince Among Marios

Beyond tightly knit control and animations, however, what made the original *Prince of Persia* such a breakthrough was its skillful approach to level design and interaction. Fortunately, its underlying philosophy appears to have prevailed in *The Sands of Time*.

Mechner elaborates: "We agreed pretty early on that in this game, the fun was not in trying five things that don't work to find the sixth thing [that does]. The fun is in, 'Okay, I know I've got to get up there, how do I do it?'—and using the movements that you're capable of in creative ways to get there. That's a big job in terms of level design—setting the cameras and the lighting—and also the storytelling, as it happens through the dialogue and the cinematics, just to make sure that the goal is always clear enough that the player is never lost, thinking, 'Here I am in this huge 3D world and I have no idea what I'm supposed to do next.'"

He likens the approach to that of an

action-adventure movie, where the narrative pull hinges not upon what the protagonist needs to do, but rather how he or she is going to do it. "The situation—the problem—is clear," Mechner says, "and it's just a matter of, 'How the heck am I going to get through this?' Films cut out the boring bits."

The team members make repeated references to "emergent gameplay," but their definition is quite different from that held by many in the industry. Here, the term refers less to the enemies and the manner in which they must be dispatched, and more to one's interaction with the levels themselves, and the various ways in which to

This is a game about **consideration and determination,** and accomplishing what you know you must do.
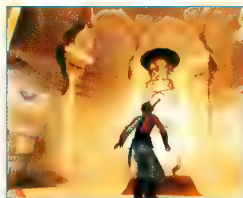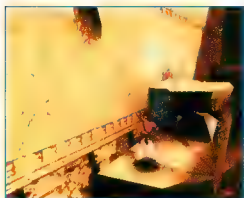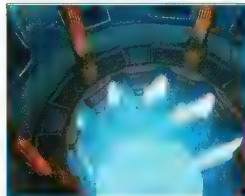
navigate them. Grabbing onto ledges, running along walls, swinging on ropes: Everything in the environment exists for a reason and, ultimately, allows for interaction. There is a level of precision and care here usually reserved for traditional platform-style games (the *Mario*s and *Sonic*s of the world), giving the adventure a depth of feel usually uncommon to its type. (Legendary game designer Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of the *Mario* and *Zelda* franchises, refers to this as "a certain toy-like quality.") Fighting is deftly managed as well, with simple-to-learn/difficult-to-master swordplay replacing the constant upgrades and power-ups that permeate the genre. Like the original, this is a game about tight efficiency rather than sheer "bigger is better" quantity.

"To be able to build levels the right way, we had to be extremely strict on the A.I. so that every distance between every wall, every column, every width, every height, everything is predetermined through and by the Prince's behavior, but also by the level designers," Mallat explains. "The true result is

that tons of emergent gameplay is arising when we play the game. Because all those distances are totally mastered, we are still discovering new ways of playing a level."

Indeed, a hands-on playtest bears this out: Several times throughout the course of our demonstration, we fortuitously find new ways to reach particular objectives, leaping from column to wall and back again with remarkable ease. Such unpredictable behavior elicits approval from the development team—partially, presumably, for the work it has done and the variety of ways in which its game permits players to interact with it.

This freedom to experiment with the world is also enabled by one of the game's most impressive elements—namely, the titular Sands of Time. These are broken down into five varieties: the powers of Revival (allowing one to rewind and replay a fatal jump off a cliff); Haste (a multienemy attack relegated to fighting); Delay (which allows for slowed hand-to-hand combat—essentially Bullet Time for the turban-wearing set); Restraint (a

combat tactic where one can freeze one especially powerful enemy to more effectively deal with the others); and Destiny (a vision into the future—essentially a glimpse of what one will face in the subsequent area).

Aside from providing a striking aes-
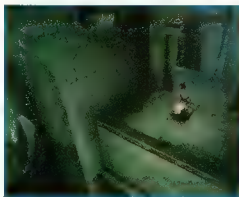
■ Control in *The Sands of Time* is suitably deep, allowing for multiple levels of skill For instance, completing the quintet of moves required to stab an enemy with a sword; jump over the enemy; slash the enemy from behind; and use your dagger to extract from him some delicious Sands of Time will require multiple moves and landings. With enough practice, however, all of these moves can be completed in one continuous, uninterrupted combo.

"pure gamer motivation." Interestingly, when Ubi Soft focus tested its game with 12- to 18-year-olds in Cincinnati, OH, the most frequently lauded aspect of the game was this—the ability to command time. (Older gamers surveyed were more impressed by the game's generally tight feel.) And perhaps this single point will drive the game, on some subtextual level, into the hearts and minds of those who play it. Desilets says: "The other [big] thing for me is the last thing we don't control as human beings: time. For me, it's the last fantasy; we're all complaining about how we should have done that instead of doing this...now we can. Other [games] have done this, but for us, it's actually in real-time."

More broadly, this connection between life and game is significant. Perhaps Desilets explains it best, when discussing what else he is most proud of in *The Sands of Time*. "It's the way of making sure everything you need to know is in the game. You don't need to know videogame rules. The universe is closed unto itself, and what you're
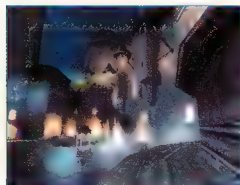
■ Says Creative Director Patrice Desilets of the game's level structure: "You don't feel the levels—it's not wide open like, say, *Grand Theft Auto III*—but once you're in the game, you're in the game." As to how they got it so right with the game's feel: "We think a lot, we argue a lot, and then we play a lot."

thetic layer to the proceedings, these abilities are also a deeply rooted part of the experience, and are in line with the forgiving nature of the team's design philosophy. Much like the original title (as well as Ubi Soft's own *Splinter Cell*), this is not a game about finding your bearings and figuring out what to do—it's about consideration and determination, and accomplishing what you know you *must* do. The ability to rewind a misplaced jump and try it again is therefore a logical next step: Why force the player to repeatedly play through entire levels because he or she missed a single foothold by three millimeters?

"It's a pure gamer's challenge," Mallat says, and one which taps into
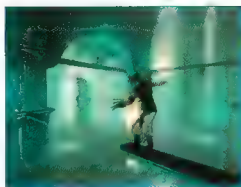
using is basically what you know from real life. And then you're using that with your character, who basically has the same abilities as you, but just does [everything] better—he's an athlete, but he's still human. Basically, I can [run] two steps along a wall—he can [run] 15. But I can understand how he can do it; you put yourself into the character and try stuff."

It's an organic and intuitive approach to game design, and one that clearly demonstrates the evolution of the medium. "Everything is fluid. I don't like videogame rules—menus and pickups," Desilets says, chuckling, "Though I was forced to do quite a bit of this in my last game, which was *Donald Duck: Goin' Quackers*.

"I think *Half-Life 2* showed us a bit, but we're also showing to the industry that it's important that the universe is
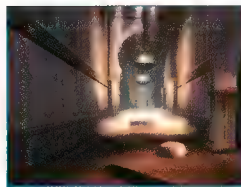
closed," he continues. "So the booby traps, the door system—[they're] implemented in the story. You know why there are booby traps in the palace: They're not there because it's a videogame, they're there because in the story, somebody asked you to make the defense system work again. And that's just one example, but there are plenty more. We tried to stay away from videogame conventions as much as possible."

Boy Meets Girl
Mechner has spent the past several years working in film, having recently finished a documentary titled *Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story*. (It's the account of the neighborhood that was destroyed in the 1950s to build Dodger Stadium, with a soundtrack by Ry Cooder of *Buena Vista Social Club*

renown and voiceover narration from Cheech Marin.) He is now working full-time on *The Sands of Time* in Montreal, his desk planted smack in the center of the main team's roughly 40 staff members. His official title is screenwriter, but he is heavily involved in the larger scope of the game, generally ensuring that it maintains its integrity with the original title.

Mechner refers to his documentary and action-adventure film experience as being invaluable to his current role. "More is not necessarily more in the eyes of the game player," he remarks. "The challenge is, how do you tell a story economically, in the right way, for
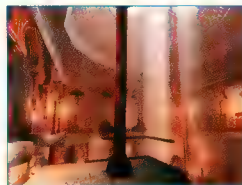
■ The game has a smooth, almost painted visual style, reminiscent of such side-scrolling fare as *Flashback*, Disney's *Aladdin*, and the original *Prince of Persia*

"With a game, **you're creating something that, in a sense, has a life of its own."**—Jordan Mechner

> "The gameplay truly drives the story, and **the story drives the gameplay.**" —Yannis Mailat
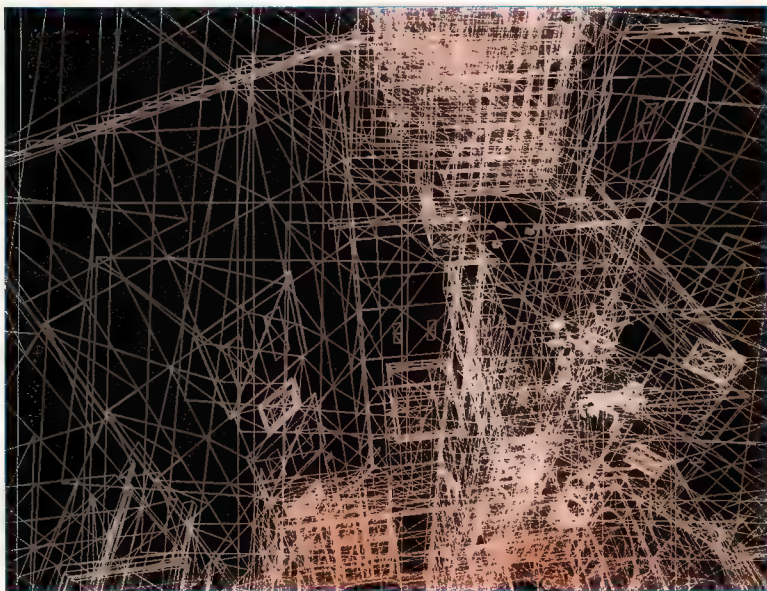
As in the original game, each room is in some ways a level unto itself, providing extensive puzzlesolving and gameplay possibilities. These wireframes help demonstrate the sheer complexity of the game's architecture.
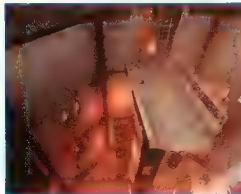
that particular game? It's really the same problem: In a documentary, you film hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage in order to make a 30 minute or a one-hour story, so you try to find the moments that will mean the most. In a game, it's about the same thing—finding those moments."

Indeed, while plot specifics are being kept largely under wraps, it's the technique and methodology behind the storytelling that inspire confidence. As to the differences between developing a narrative in each of the two forms of media, Mechner's twitchy, restless excitement toward his work becomes even more pronounced.

"A story in a game is a different thing," he says. "A film is a pure story, in that what happens to the characters is what makes the story. But in a game, the story is also what you do—not what the fictional hero in the game does, but what you the player do. If you try five times to achieve a certain walling in a jump, and first four times you die and the fifth time you make it, that's part of the story. So it's really those two things together that make a videogame.

"Telling a story in a movie, you're controlling it moment by moment," he continues. "With a game, you're creating something that in a sense has a life of its own, and every player that comes to it is going to play their own version of the story. You can't write a scene the way you do in a movie; you have to be conscious of what the different possibilities are and plan for that. When it works, it can be magic: When a player has the feeling that somehow the little bit of dialogue seemed so appropriate for what he's just been through that it's uncanny—that's the kind of magic moment that you aim for. And you try to avoid the clunky moment where it's like, 'Okay, I see that this is part of the

cut-scene, but it's got nothing to do with what I've been doing for the past half hour.'"

Mechner cites last year's exquisite PlayStation 2 journey *Ico* as the last game that "really consumed me." From speaking with the team throughout the day, it becomes clear that many of its members have been inspired by it as well. Repeated references are made to a lead female character named Farah who is to appear in *The Sands of Time*, and Mechner appears to be spending many of his waking hours developing the relationship between the two main characters.

Apparently, Farah will appear as a real-time, interactive character, and a significant part of the roughly 20-hour play experience will in fact take place with her on the screen. Of course, it remains to be seen whether or not the game will be able to match the depth of mood and emotion that existed between the protagonist and Yorda in *Ico*; given the pedigree and the clear level of thought being put into the design behind it, however, confidence comes rather easily.

Mallat's commentary on this dynamic is insightful. "The gameplay truly drives the story, and the story drives the gameplay. When you encounter a certain princess…while she is with you and the two characters are unfolding the whole story, they are victims of the story as well as builders of the story. This is accomplished through the complex interactions between the main characters."

Cloak and Dagger
And it's this depth of character and interaction that, clearly, is the beauty of not only the game, but also the creative process behind it. The elements work well together because the various artists and technicians (and combina-

tions thereof) behind it understand, respect, and improve upon the work of those around them. Mechner constantly pours over the story; Desilets over the game and level design ("To me," he divulges, "the character is a block"); and Mallat over the ongoing solidity of the entire project.

"And this is what I am most proud of: the unity of the team," Mallat remarks. "You can ask anyone here at Ubi Soft—the *Prince of Persia* team is one [entity]." Desilets echoes this sentiment, noting that nearly all of the leads and many of the staffers on the game have collaborated on past titles and understand one another's approach to design. "We're also the same people working together for a long time—we know each other and we're friends, and we've really learned to make games together."

And so, in hindsight, perhaps the indefinable element—the *je ne sais quoi*—isn't quite so difficult to pin down after all. Maybe, in fact, that esoteric piece of the puzzle is merely the positive, creative, and unified energy of the team, channeled directly into something with an undeniably superb fundamental structure. And perhaps Mechner's final word on the matter says it best: "When I work on a project, I want to create that one game a year that forces me to play it. And I'm confident that this will be it." ∎

The Die Hard Factor

Much like Bruce Willis in the original *Die Hard*, whose initially clean-cut outfit and primped hair devolves into bloody bare feet and a threadbare wifebeater by the end of the film, players will see a physical evolution of their protagonist over the course of *The Sands of Time*. "It's not the type of game where you collect stuff," Creative Director Patrice Desilets says. "You collect experience, but it's a narrative experience. So you know why your character has no shirt by the end. It's the level of attachment; your character changes and evolves visually over the course of the experience."

THE ESRB VIDEO & COMPUTER GAME RATINGS

Find out whether a computer or video game is right for your home.

Learn more about the Entertainment Software Review Board rating system and how games get rated on **www.esrb.org.**

EARLY CHILDHOOD
Titles rated "Early Childhood (EC)" have content that may be suitable for children ages three and older and do not contain any material that parents would find inappropriate.

EVERYONE
Titles rated "Everyone (E)" have content that may be suitable for persons ages six and older. These titles will appeal to people of many ages and tastes. They may contain minimal violence, some comic mischief (for example, slapstick comedy), or some crude language.

TEEN
Titles rated "Teen (T)" have content that may be suitable for persons ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.

MATURE
Titles rated "Mature (M)" have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. These products may include more intense violence or language than products in the Teen category. In addition, these titles may also include mature sexual themes.

ADULTS ONLY
Titles rated "Adults Only (AO)" have content suitable only for adults. These products may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adults Only products are not inten-ded to be sold or rented to persons under the age of 18.

RATING PENDING
Product has been submitted to the ESRB and is awaiting final rating.

Namco's *Breakdown*

Kingdom Under Fire: Crusaders

Tony Hawk's Underground

Painkiller

FIFA World Cup 2004

FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

What do *SSX 3, Need for Speed Underground,* and Electronic Arts' entire sports lineup have in common? They are all online—exclusively for PlayStation 2.

The dispute between EA and Microsoft stems from the centralized architecture of the Xbox Live service, web site gamemarketwatch.com says. Microsoft's tight control over its network is based upon a relationship between itself and the consumer. EA doesn't like this, especially when it stands in opposition to Sony's network, which affords publishers more autonomy and flexibility to control the various aspects of the game (including

pricing and revenue collection). Xbox's approach, Microsoft contends, saves publishers the cost of the technical infrastructure required for online games.

Microsoft wants EA games on Xbox Live. But EA execs say Microsoft refuses to share a percentage of its subscription revenues with publishers, and this was the crucial disconnect. *Game Marketwatch* reports that the last meeting between Microsoft and EA took place in mid-April. Microsoft's Robbie Bach declined to comment, but EA's Larry Probst says he issued a warning that EA would build its own service, telling Bach, "Robbie, you don't need us, and we don't need you."

LORD OF THE RINGS: RETURN OF THE KING

EA's second showdown in Middle-earth is heading your way this fall. Big, bold, and beautiful, it may well be the best blockbuster film you've ever played...

While history says otherwise, last year's *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* dispelled the myth that big Hollywood movies and videogames can't be the best of friends. Electronic Arts' game wasn't perfect, of course, and anyone craving a *Lord of the Rings* game more substantial than an ever-so-slick homage to Sega's *Golden Axe* will be disappointed. But few were. This tight, playable brawler is packed with rich detail and spectacular set-pieces from the movies, and in this respect, at least, has arguably set a whole new standard for movie-to-game conversions.

The follow-up—based on the concluding part of Peter Jackson's big-screen interpretation of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy—is entering the final straight at EA's Northern California headquarters. This time around, the plans are even more ambitious. The film will hit movie theaters on December 17—one day earlier than last year's installment—and all versions of the game (across five platforms, and in an incredible 80 different languages) will ship simultaneously on November 4. The reasoning for this is pretty obvious.

For the 100-person team that's been slaving over *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, sights were initially set high, with even more resources thrown at the second project. Thankfully, a priority was to address the shortcomings of the first game—despite its strengths, there are many.

Lord of the Game

"As gamers, we knew what the deficiencies in *The Two Towers* were," Executive Producer Neil Young says.

"The two key areas we wanted to make sure we nailed this time around were the addition of co-op and better interaction with the levels."

Young concedes cooperative play was something so painfully absent from *The Two Towers* that it's a given to include it this time. "If last year's game was *Golden Axe* meets *Lord of the Rings*, then this year's game is *Gauntlet* meets *Lord of the Rings*," he says. "In every single one of the levels, there's a layer that's designed to suit co-op, to give the player some extra choices in how they deal with combat situations."

While this doesn't mean the game will play entirely differently with two participants, it does mean those trusty speed attacks, fierce attacks, parries and physical attacks can be coordinated. And a potion-sharing

system (such as in *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*) means continues won't come cheap or without a few squabbles.

Addressing another criticism of the first game, the developers have created environments that facilitate greater interaction and exploration. The game's levels have been expanded, and now feature destructible scenery (with realistic physics) and objects that can be used as weapons (such as war pikes or torches), or solutions to puzzles. Characters can swing over walls, drop down ropes and run up and down ladders or stairways. In broader terms, there's no must-do sequence of events here, which is surely one of the biggest improvements—although the heads-up display will make it clearer what the player should be doing this time around.

Six levels are in full-tilt production, with more to follow. However, so far, only the Minis Tirith and Southern Gate stages have been shown off. One section in Minis Tirith sees Gandalf trying to dispatch hundreds of orcs mounting the wall in droves from docking siege towers, while simultaneously firing catapults and dodging a swooping Fell Beast. Killing the Beast sees it fall from the sky and realistically crashes into a tower, sending large chunks of debris everywhere. It's a dramatic set piece designed not just for effect; the rubble

blocks your path, meaning warriors need to find another way forward.

Structurally, *Return of the King* has been completely overhauled from *The Two Towers*. Whereas the previous game was a linear level-to-level affair, this time players choose one of three distinctly different paths from the start—almost echoing the way *OutRun* or *Starfox* open levels. This means three distinct story arcs can be traced, each of which closely replicate the plot threads in the upcoming movie. Players will make their way through many J.R.R. Tolkien locales, such as Paths of the Dead, Kirith Ungol, The Black Gates, and Shelob's Lair.

Joining Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli as playable characters this year are Gandalf, Frodo, Sam, and slippery Golem (as well as two to four hidden unlockable characters). Gandalf has his own path, while Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli share another (the co-op mode kicks off here; and as characters are unlocked, other paths will include co-op), and Frodo, Sam, and Golem share the third. Interestingly, players can switch from path to path (and, as

The game's levels have been expanded and **now feature destructible scenery.**

Trogdor the Burninator burninated the countryside "Trogdor was a man/he was a dragon-man/ maybe he was just a dragon/but he was still TROG-DORR!" To hear this catchy tune, drop this magazine and check out the song downloads menu at www.homestarrunner.com/homester.html .

before, character to character).

There are three types of levels in *King*. System levels have multiple objectives, such as *Towers'* Helm's Deep. These apply a number of layers of pressure—what Young refers to as "competing compulsions" for the player —such as walls overrun with orcs, as well as time and health pressures. Arena levels are for pure fighting, and finally, A to B levels are those that simply require a character to get from one section to the next— although now there are route choices to be made inside the levels, too.

As with *The Two Towers*, perhaps the overriding strength of *Return of the King* isn't that it will be the greatest old-school-style brawler ever conceived (although it is certainly the most ambitious). Nor is it the fact that it's necessarily the ultimate MMORPG or *Halo*-style immersive epic some might think will best serve Tolkien's world. What EA's game has that no other film license before it has come close to is a

degree of authenticity and visual dexterity that truly do service to the film...something a certain blockbuster-movie-licensed game out there right now can't quite muster.

Young doesn't miss the chance to point this out. "If you compare the look of *ROTK* to that of *Enter the Matrix*, you're going to see a huge difference in terms of the visual quality and correlation with the film. And unlike *Enter the Matrix*, where you don't really have Neo to play and you don't really have Trinity to play, here you've got all the characters as they are in the film."

EA has yet to show an abundance of the game, but it's looking like *Return of the King* is set to vastly eclipse *The Two Towers*. Better still, the Xbox version will be closer to the PC than PlayStation 2 version, which means higher-res textures and more complex geometry.

Roll on fall, and hail the *Return of the King*.
Jason Brookes

BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

Long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away, a young girl set off with her faithful pig-man friend to take pictures of exotic animals. A videogame ensued.

Beyond *Good and Evil* must be doing wonders for Michel Ancel's ego. The creator of Rayman saw his limbless hero receive rave reviews for years, but nobody ever seemed to mention his name along with them. When Ubi Soft needs a hook to promote an original title, though, every mention of *Evil* starts with, "From the creator of *Rayman*, Michel Ancel…" Finally, a little recognition.

Evil has no explicit kinship with *Rayman*, but it would be hard to play the one and not think of the other. While retaining its level of quality in artwork and design, it's in many ways an evolution of *Rayman*'s simpler style. It moves from cartoon characters to more realistic heroes; from simple platforming to more complex 3D combat; from a straightforward

save-the-princess story to what has the makings of a science-fiction epic.

That epic begins on the planet Hillys, inhabited by Rastafarian rhinoceros-men, cantankerous anthropomorphic pigs, a host of other flora and fauna—and at least one near-human, an amateur journalist named Jade. Her range of employment suits her many talents: She runs a home for war orphans, photographs native animals for the local science institute, and seems to be on the verge of joining an underground rebellion. Hillys is besieged by alien conquerors, the Domz, who bombard the planet with

dangerous monsters. The planetary government seems to have its defense in hand, but who's on what side may not be as clear-cut as it seems.

As the plot thickens, *Evil* offers plenty of opportunities to explore its world, and the art direction makes it a world worth exploring. The Jade engine is still very impressive technology, but it's not the world-beater it seemed to be a year ago. Rather, it's just good enough to realize superb characters and world designs. You can't pigeonhole the game's artwork, tying it to a particular style or influence; like *Rayman*, it has its own aesthetic,

Evil offers plenty of opportunities to explore its world, and the art direction makes it a **world worth exploring.**
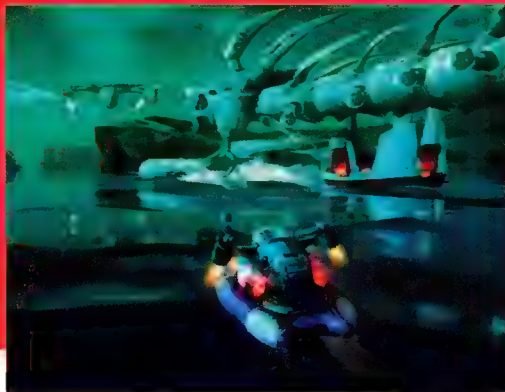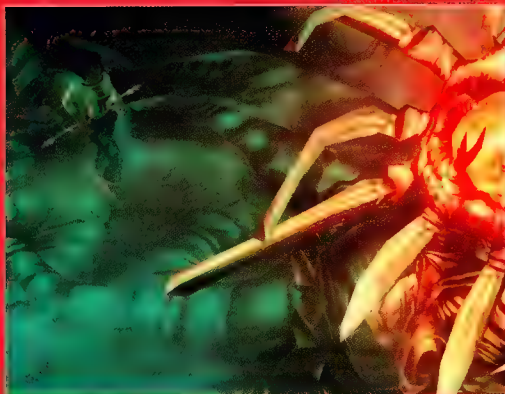
☐ Like many French games before it, *Beyond Good and Evil* features beautiful art direction and Maurice Chevalier wearing a dapper tuxedo. (Note: Mr. Chevalier will not appear in the game.)

☐ Beyond good and evil lies ennui. Or, alternately, cheese, polyester, The Watusi, Oingo Bongo, Happy Fun Ball, clothespins, lava lamps, Esther Rolle, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

realized with detailed shadings of color and careful animation.

Seeing the sights is its own reward, but exploring also offers more tangible benefits. In addition to missions driving the plot, many side quests will appear. Sailing through a city, you might have the opportunity to save a burning building; it's not necessary, but bonus items reward extra effort. Meanwhile, some quests last the entire game, like Jade's mission to photograph the animals of Hillys. It's *Pokémon Snap*, but with a game to go along with it.

That game blends 3D action with vehicle-based overworld sequences, where Jade and Pey'j (her pig-man sidekick) navigate their archipelago home by hovercraft. The craft begins as a slow, seagoing clunker, but it later

acquires everything from booster engines to flight capability. Sailing around a becalmed world makes for excellent sightseeing—both empty seas and Venice-like cities have their own charm—but the vehicle controls could use some tuning for easier combat on the water. Pressing the analog stick in one direction moves the hovercraft that way, which is simple but cumbersome in a pinch. Separate throttle and steering controls would make for far better handling.

There's less to complain about when our heroes hit the dirt. *Evil* makes controlling the characters as transparent as possible, employing automatic targeting in combat and mostly automatic camera controls; even at this stage, the controls are

very well-tuned. The target selection rarely goes wrong, so combat is easy to jump into, and it's livened up by flashy cinematic slow-motion effects. The game also emphasizes teamwork in puzzle-solving, making Jade and Pey'j work together to break through an inventive series of obstacles.

"Inventive" characterizes much of what makes this game so promising. 3D adventure games are a dime a dozen these days, and it takes something special to stand out in comparison—something like a finely crafted world and gameplay that offers more than just a simple action experience. As *Rayman* set itself apart from comparatively bland competition, so too does this necessary *Evil*.
Dave Smith

"I'm a photojournalist!"

Jade's weapon, the "dai-jo," may be her most useful tool, but her most versatile is a simple camera. Snapping pictures of Hillys' native animals earns cash, and in the style of *Metroid Prime*, photographing other features of the environment yields helpful expository details. As the game goes on, you can upgrade the camera with new capabilities.

KINGDOM UNDER FIRE: THE CRUSADERS

It's an action game. No, it's an RTS game. No, wait a moment, scratch that, it's an action game again. Sometimes.

Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders has almost nothing in common with the cookie-cutter RTS that's ostensibly its predecessor. Phantagram's second effort under the name is a promising action-strategy hybrid with massive 3D battles straight out of *Braveheart*.

At first glance, the action is reminiscent of Koei's *Dynasty Warriors*: You pick one of four heroes, two on each side of the war between light and dark, and proceed to hack and slash your way through a crowded fantasy melee. That's only the first level, though. Underneath the hand-to-hand combat are layers of strategy as you build an army with different talents and direct its movements around the expansive battlefields. On that level, *Crusaders* resembles another Koei production, *Kessen*, with streamlined army manage-

ment off the battlefield and fast-moving real-time strategy during combat.

Outside combat, the logistics and command interface are presented as a 3D castle town. You can move around town or head to another one, building up the powers of the hero and his army, buying new combos and special attacks for heroes, and hiring new troops to broaden the army's strengths. More than 30 units are available in total, including infantry, siege weapons, and flying units such as griffons and blimps. You can buy units with an eye toward enhancing particular areas of the army's capabilities and

develop them with the same intentions in mind. As units gain experience, their abilities increase, and some can move forward along different paths. A unit of infantry can evolve into a fast and mobile cavalry squad or specialize as a slow and powerful mortar team.

Once you join a battle, you act on two levels. On the immediate level of your hero's engagement, it's straight-up action between the unit and whatever foes it's facing. There's not a lot to control here besides the individual hero and the two supporting heroes, who can deliver a special attack when their power meters fill. At
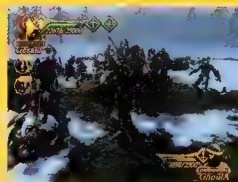
The War of Men with Funny Headgear raged for 20 years until all involved agreed to settle on multicolored propeller beanies, with pork-pie hats reserved for holidays and clambakes.

Clem the Atrocious (aka Clem the Unwashed) lobbied to be made "Orc Vangard" [sic], but lost the popular vote to Utho the Fecal Smelling.

any time, however, you can swap to a map showing the entire battlefield, adding a more traditional RTS overlay to the 3D action. On the field map, you command subordinate units with which the hero isn't directly involved, sending them into engagements with other enemy units or using them to launch supporting attacks.

Artillery and other ranged troops are useful in this kind of role. You can keep them back from the fray, where opposing infantry would take them apart, and bring them in to destroy vulnerable enemy units or for specialized purposes—say, for when archers are needed to kill aerial units. Shifting terrain can affect this kind of strategy, though; it's a good idea to protect a unit of archers under cover, perhaps hidden in a forest. (This could prove difficult, however, if the opposition sends in fire arrows or mortar barrages to burn down the trees.) Other features of the environment can have different effects, including weather and the day/night cycle (some troops might fight more effectively at night).

Crusaders holds more strategy than the average action game, and the action that a slow-paced strategy game needs in order to mix things up. Its action and strategy components mesh well, though controlling the army on the macro level necessarily requires abandoning the micro level. The A.I. is strong enough to handle things in the absence of direct involvement and to protect a hero in the midst of micro-management. In theory, it seems all the unit management would jarringly interrupt the action, but in practice, it offers a pleasantly cerebral leavening to what could otherwise be a monotonous hack-fest. The large-scale unit control handily compresses the dead time between engagements that bogs down *Dynasty Warriors*.

Crusaders still has a way to go in some areas, such as sprucing up its background graphics (although the clashes between armies already look suitably impressive) and solidifying the structure of its army management system. It's made a very promising beginning so far, however, and the rest of 2003 should provide ample time to ready it for the war-torn holiday gaming season.

Crusaders' humans and Dark Legion each get different units. The human army is built around specialized infantry as simple foot soldiers evolve into multiple roles. But the Legion gets all the exotic troops: orc wolfriders, scorpion catapults, Swamp Mammoths, and giant Ghouls. The good guys may be simpler, but the bad guys look like a lot more fun.

BREAKDOWN

Derrick is a man with no memory, and a weird white growth on his arms. When things break down in *Breakdown*, they really break down.

Five to 10 years ago, American developers were falling over themselves trying to figure out how to penetrate the ineffable Japanese market. Funny how things turn out: History, like a pendulum, has a way of swinging from one extreme to another. The increasing success of the Xbox in America has led to an ironic inversion of the former status quo; nowadays, Japanese developers are the ones struggling to understand the vagaries of the American market. One of the latest developers to face the challenges of this brave new international world is Namco. Hopes are high that its project *Breakdown* will appeal to American gamers becoming increasingly disinterested in Japanese videogames.

Namco describes *Breakdown* as a "first-person action-adventure."

Certainly, if you're trying to create a game appealing to American audiences, a first-person title would appear to be the obvious choice. But is it wise to compete against westerners at their own game? After all, the Xbox will soon be home to such heavyweights as *Doom III* and *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War*—not to mention the 800-pound gorilla *Halo 2*.

Breakdown producer Hirofumi Kami shared a few juicy details about this secretive project. Though the game's first-person perspective may seem like an unusual choice for a title developed by a Japanese company, it's understandable when you hear Kami's background: He worked as a producer on the three titles in Namco's first-person gun-shooting series, *Time Crisis*. The jump to a first-person action-adventure is more of a small sideways

hop than a leap of faith into the unknown. But *Breakdown* offers new challenges not found in a rail-based shooter like *Time Crisis*. "In *Time Crisis*," Kami says, "the director's job is to create a number of set, interesting encounters with enemies, then to connect those encounters into a stage. With a game like *Breakdown*, the director's role is to make sure that the story, gameplay, and atmosphere all work well together."

Breakdown is being designed from the ground up as a single-player experience—currently, there are no plans to support split-screen multiplayer or Xbox Live. As such, every single element of the story, gameplay, and atmosphere is being crafted with the overall single-player experience in mind. "The Xbox is a very interesting piece of hardware," Kami says. "Our

programmers find it easier to work with than the PlayStation 2." This has translated into more opportunities for the programmers to show off; *Breakdown*'s environments are filled with the kind of lighting, particle effects, and detailed architecture found in the best-looking Xbox games out there.

Of course, impressive graphics are not enough; for the player's experience to be complete, the story and gameplay will have to match. The game begins with the player character, Derrick Cole, waking up on a bed with no memory of who he is, or how he got there. Derrick's arms are covered with glowing, white-hot veins of energy, giving him a mysterious power and strength he will soon depend on for survival.

"I want the player to feel what Derrick is feeling during the game," Kami explains. "While playing a game, the player often thinks, 'What do I want to do?' or 'What does the hero want to do?' In this game, I want what the player wants and what Derrick wants

to always be the same thing." Consequently, plot details are being kept under tight wraps: If the player knew more than Derrick did going into the game, the experience would be tainted. Ideally, the player won't just observe what happens to Derrick, but feel the highs and lows of his adventure along with him.

To that end, most of *Breakdown*'s narrative elements are integrated directly into the gameplay. "*Breakdown* is like an action movie," Kami says. "In other movie-like games, players feel like they're watching a movie. With *Breakdown,* I want players to be in the movie. I want them to feel like they are the hero." Footage and screenshots released so far call to mind any number of recent special-effects-laden summer spectaculars. When pressed to name specific titles that have influenced development, Kami just smiles and says, "Action movies with cool heroes in them."

Like any good action hero, Derrick

"I want what the player wants and what [the protagonist] wants to **always be the same thing**."

I'm Alex.
I came to get you.

⊡ This is a picture of a human hand holding some type of card. If it's a credit card, *Xbox Nation* strongly recommends not leaving home without it.

doesn't fight alone: he has a sidekick in the form of the beautiful and mysterious Alex. Alex, a skilled fighter, saves Derrick's ass soon after he awakens. She claims to know something about Derrick's past and asks for his trust... not knowing what else to do, Derrick obliges. In addition to providing information, Alex fights alongside Derrick during the game, providing much-needed gameplay support.

Combat in *Breakdown* is where the game diverges from the genre status-quo: In addition to weaponry such as pistols, machine guns, and rocket launchers, Derrick can use his own supercharged punches and kicks as lethal attacks. Some members of the *Breakdown* team previously worked on *Tekken* games, so melee combat will almost certainly be more engaging than in most shooters. Still, don't expect Derrick to be unleashing 10-string combos from a first-person perspective; the focus on the melee combat is on immediacy over flash.

"When you use a gun in a first-person game," Kami explains, "the enemy is far away and hard to see. With punches and kicks, the enemy is right in front of you and you can see the detail. It's exciting to feel like you're fighting the enemy up close and not just shooting them from a distance." Players can only carry a single weapon at a time, and the nature of close-quarters melee combat means Derrick can't punch or kick and carry a weapon at the same time. This strict delineation of abilities forces players to judge their enemies carefully and engage them with the proper tools.

Rounding off the overall experience is the sound. Kami wants the game to have a kick-ass, licensed soundtrack like a summer action blockbuster movie, so the Japanese team is working with Namco Hometek [in America] to find a number of suitably intense domestic artists. The trailer shown at E3, for example, featured the song "Take It Off" by the group Trust

Company. There will also be 5.1 Dolby Digital support for a more immersive soundscape. The game will be recorded in English for all territories, and the *Breakdown* team is working closely with the American branch to choose voice actors and to write the dialogue, ensuring the game will be free of the awkward cultural malapropisms and Engrish endemic to Japanese-developed titles.

Namco has yet to commit to a release date—the current answer is that *Breakdown* will ship "when it's ready." Namco and Kami have a unique and stylish approach to the genre that makes the game stand out from the pack. Though it's being designed for an American audience, its greatest strength may be its Japanese origins. Combined with the power of the Xbox, Namco gives *Breakdown* a polished style and atmosphere that may help it infiltrate the minds of American gamers.
Andrew Vestal

New is the Create-a-Trick feature, where players can add rotations, flips, and animation blends.

Players no longer control pro skaters in the game; rather, they create fully customized avatars.

T.H.U.G.

Another year, another *Tony Hawk* game. Can Neversoft keep up this rapid-fire pace?

Dev: Neversoft
Pub: Activision

Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: Los Angeles, CA

Faced with the difficult task of reinventing its seminal, zillion-selling franchise, Neversoft has once again become close friends with the company drawing board.

"Previous iterations of the game have been about completing goals and doing random things," *Tony Hawk's Underground* Project Lead Scott Pease says. "This time we're trying to give you better motivation for playing through the game—you'll do goals and challenges, but those will unlock the next part of the story." A skaboarding adventure game? Perhaps it's a ridiculous concept at first glace, but, upon further consideration, it certainly has its merits.

Producer Joel Jewitt elaborates: "We've been having a blast with the story. We went out and spent time talking with all the pro skaters who we've worked with over the past years—like Tony Hawk, Chad Muska—and there [are] a lot of similarities in the things that

they've gone through in getting to where they are today." From this they culled a tale that begins on the East Coast and, as the player gets more exposure, moves west, and ultimately worldwide.

Significant to the "adventure" aspect of the game is the fact that digital skaters will be able to get off of their boards and travel around on foot, lending a more open feel to the proceedings. "We're giving you more things to do while making sure that we stay true to skating—it's still a skateboarding videogame," Jewitt says.

Sadly, the Xbox version already seems like an afterthought: all online play will be exclusive to the PlayStation 2 (including a face-mapping feature, whereby players will be able to customize their skater with a digital image of themselves). Regardless, it's still too early to tell whether this odd marriage of trick/points-based gameplay and developing story will hold water.

PAINKILLER

Dev: People Can Fly
Pub: DreamCatcher

Expected Release: TBD 2004
Origin: Poland

Painkiller, boasting "adrenaline-rush-style gameplay," looks to be just the right ticket for shooter fans who favor frantic action over paced narrative.

Sure, there is some ooky story involving demons and purgatory, but don't mistake this for *Paradise Lost: The Lost Manuscript*; *Painkiller*'s story merely supplements the voluminous, over-the-top mayhem. You can't get much more frantic—or absurd—than walking into a room filled to the brim with ax-wielding monks and sickle-sporting skeletons. This legion of gothic ghoulies is scattered around 19

vast levels, which range from arena ruins to stereotypically haunted crypts to deceptively serene waterfronts.

The one thing that stands out in *Painkiller* is the sheer size of its bosses. Entering a boss battle and gazing at the sheer enormity before you is akin to gawking at the gargantuan Kraken from *Clash Of The Titans*. However, unlike Perseus, you happen to be carrying a heavy machine gun (one of five weapons, each with alternate fire) instead of Medusa's head.

Xbox players can kick back with *Painkiller* and unload grenades on in-game behemoths come 2004.
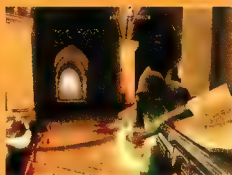
TRINITY

Dev: Gray Matter
Pub: Activision

Release: TBD 2004
Origin: Los Angeles

The great thing about the groundbreaking *Matrix* franchise is that, although the official game eats ass sandwiches, players can still relive its slow-motion thrills in any number of *Matrix*-inspired clones.

Case in point: *Trinity*. Developer Gray Matter promises plenty of heat-warped bullet trails and acrobatic gunplay with its latest near-future FPS. Players take on the role of Nightstalker, an enhanced super-soldier who pops caps (and gets chicks) with mucho style and flair. Sure, a *Matrix*-style FPS is a no-brainer given the genre; but performing side-flips and aerial twists in the first-person? Sounds like a sure formula for vomit.

THOUSAND LAND

Welcome stranger, to *Thousand Land*, possibly the strangest land of all time. (Including Candy Land.)

Dev: From Software
Pub: From Software

Expected Release TBA (US)
Origin: Japan
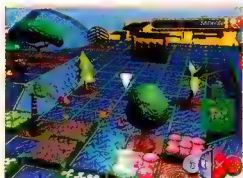
In this strange land, trees climb people and orange is the new puce. Go figure!
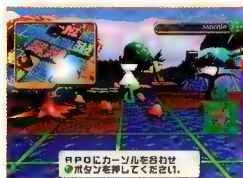
Tiny acorn men dance and frolic, by which we mean we have no idea as to what they're doing

Japanese outfit From Software has become a formidable Xbox developer. But while its *Murakumo* and *O.to.gi* were explosive action games, *Thousand Land* is an altogether different proposition.

The immediate observation—that *Thousand Land*'s graphics engine appears to push polygons coated with Play-doh—was fittingly unsettling. Beneath this distinctive façade is a gameplay system equally unusual. Put simply, *Thousand Land* is a strategy game. But there's more to it than just that. There's a bit of *Sim City*, dashes of Nintendo's *Pikmin* and *Advance Wars*, and a smattering of *Worms*.

As a user on the .Geo network, the player's invisible "hand of God" presence controls the movement of troops on maps. Troops come in two flavors: little and not-so-little. The little ones are used to carry out work on the map layout, while the fatties are used primarily

as attacking forces. But deployment of troops is only one side of the story—necessary too are map design and the construction of fortifications. Another distinguishing feature is the option of altering the relief, thereby creating hills as natural barriers and valleys into which opposing forces may tumble.

At the center of each map is a Core, the equivalent of the king in chess, and it must be guarded at all costs. On the offensive front, the opponent's Core must be attacked. Players who are successful in battle are rewarded with tools and items for use in future encounters. And there will be plenty of conflicts: There are some 1,000 virtual users of the .Geo network to battle. Beyond that, on Xbox Live, there are likely to be many more thousands of real users to compete with. To the point, *Thousand Land* appears to be a constantly intriguing, rewarding, and compelling game—both online and off.
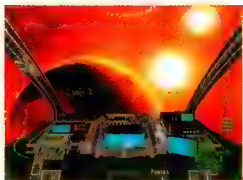
BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

.: Dev: Warthog   □ Release: Fall 2003
   Pub: Universal   □ Origin: England

Everything old is new again, as Universal Interactive proves by reaching back into the '70s to pluck the sci-fi TV show *Battlestar Galactica* from obscurity. *Battlestar Galactica* for Xbox will be tackled by Warthog, maker of PlayStation's *Colony Wars* series, and promises to show a side of the well-loved series viewers never got to see.

Galactica will be set 40 or so years before the show. Players take the role of Ensign Adama, future captain of the *Galactica*, as he plows through various combat missions pitting him against the robotic no-goodniks, the Cylons. Expect lots of shooting, ships to steer, and special effects such as lens flare and explosive particles.
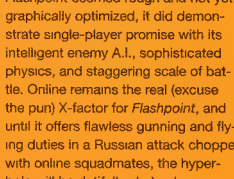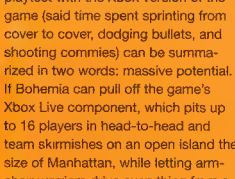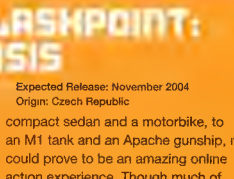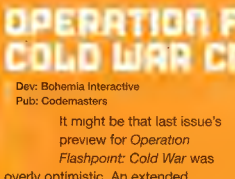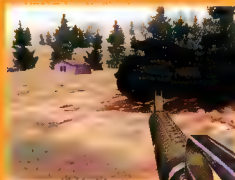
OPERATION FLASHPOINT: COLD WAR CRISIS

Dev: Bohemia Interactive
Pub: Codemasters

Expected Release: November 2004
Origin: Czech Republic

It might be that last issue's preview for *Operation Flashpoint: Cold War* was overly optimistic. An extended playtest with the Xbox version of the game (said time spent sprinting from cover to cover, dodging bullets, and shooting commies) can be summarized in two words: massive potential. If Bohemia can pull off the game's Xbox Live component, which pits up to 16 players in head-to-head and team skirmishes on an open island the size of Manhattan, while letting armchair warriors drive everything from a

compact sedan and a motorbike, to an M1 tank and an Apache gunship, it could prove to be an amazing online action experience. Though much of *Flashpoint* seemed rough and not yet graphically optimized, it did demonstrate single-player promise with its intelligent enemy A.I., sophisticated physics, and staggering scale of battle. Online remains the real (excuse the pun) X-factor for *Flashpoint*, and until it offers flawless gunning and flying duties in a Russian attack chopper with online squadmates, the hyperbole will be dutifully shelved.
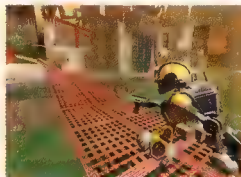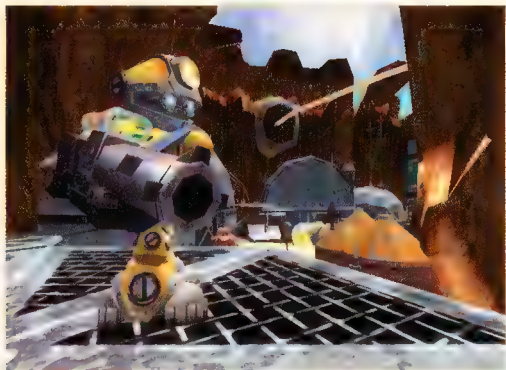
This is a bridge over troubled water. It demands crossing.
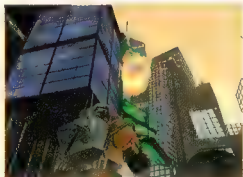
ProTip: Do not stare directly into the sun, as it will cause you to grow hair on your palms

METAL ARMS: GLITCH IN THE SYSTEM

Don't suffer slings or arrows. Take (Metal) arms against a sea of robotic trouble.

Dev: Swingin' Ape Studios
Pub: Vivendi Universal

Expected Release: November 2003
Origin: Aliso Viejo, CA

Sassy robots blowing each other to kingdom come—if there is anything sweeter, humankind has yet to unearth it. Vivendi's third-person shooter *Metal Arms: Glitch in the System* offers both robots and shattered automaton parts in mass quantities, and, in the land, there is much rejoicing.

System's free-the-oppressed-robots-from-slavery story is suitably goofy, but does give meaning to, and sufficient fuel for, the game's gorgeous action. The shooting is served up with *Halo*-style controls, and it's possible for the heroic Glitch (a squat, eminently likeable yellow-and-orange droid) to possess and control 12 other robots, including fearsome bosses, and to commandeer four vehicles. *System* holds more than 50 varied missions on six cool worlds, and players can expect to sneak and snipe, solve puzzles, and employ mindless killing tactics. The game also holds a multiplayer mode that was not playable at press time, but will allow for four-player (non-Xbox Live) deathmatches.

In motion, *System* moves with fluidity and features neat graphical goodies such as robots assembling themselves from spare parts, and damaged enemies hopping around on one leg or resting on their torsos after being divested of both legs.

System will be released for Xbox and other platforms come winter, and there's no indication that any of the game's versions will differ from one another. This is unfortunate, as the Xbox version would soar with online play, downloadable missions, or such fineries as the ability to rip songs from a CD to create a unique soundtrack.

Nonetheless, the sentiment here is very, very domo arigato, Mr. Roboto.

SSX 3

Dev: EA Canada
Pub: EA Sports Big

Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: Canada

Previous *SSX* games have proven popular thanks to a loose interpretation of snowboarding physics, favoring fun gameplay over hardcore realism.

SSX 3 takes things even further this fall by incorporating several structural ideas that owe a debt of gratitude to *Grand Theft Auto 3*. Instead of selecting challenges from a menu, everything takes place on a single gigantic mountain that acts as a free-roaming environment. Cruise around the slopes and players will find numerous challenges that have them competing in races, trick challenges, or time trials. Once they're done, they either continue down the hill or jump on a ski lift to head higher up the mountain.

The sense of scale the single mountain provides is supplemented by a different attitude for the characters and tricks this time around. Gone, we're told, are the celebrity voices such as Macy Gray, Billy Zane, and others. They've been replaced by characters more appropriate (surprise, surprise) to snowboarding culture. No more big, fat biker boarders or dumb-ass white-boy afros then, nor will there be any online play. For shame.

STAR TREK: SHATTERED UNIVERSE

Dev: Starsphere Inter.
Pub: TDK Mediactive

Release: Fall 2003
Origin: Northridge, CA

Star Trek: Shattered Universe's development hasn't been going at warp speed. The game has been in development for more than two years, but finally, things are shaping up. TDK Mediactive showed off a spiffy version of *Universe* at E3, with players treated to fighter-based combat against a host of hostile spacecraft, including Federation ships from the twisted "Mirror, Mirror" episode of the original *Star Trek*. The developers promise 360-degree combat with approximately 20 combat missions to fly and pilotable ships from the Gorn, Klingon, and Romulan Empires.

SONIC HEROES

Sega's blue erinaceidae mascot makes its Xbox debut. But is it too little too late?

Everybody wants to be on Sonic's team. Everyone except the no-good Dr. Robotnik.

Amy leads a team of nerds, complete with the obese, frog-seeking Big the Cat.

Dev: Sonic Team
Pub: Sega

Expected Release: Spring 2004
Origin: Japan

Sega's venerable videogame icon *Sonic the Hedgehog* experienced his share of transitional hiccups when he moved from the safety of a spritely 2D world and onto the Dreamcast's newly created 3D universe. *Sonic*'s ultra-fast gameplay, which blazed new trails for the *Mario*-dominated 2D platformer, became meandering and riddled with mediocre fetch-quests that hampered the *Sonic Adventure* titles.

For its Xbox debut, creator Yuji Naka and his illustrious Sonic Team spin yet another tale of freedom-loving animals raging perpetually against Dr. Robotnik's evil machines. Realizing that much of what made the *Sonic* games so damn appealing was their focused, track-like level designs that funneled players through a slipstream of speed and adrenaline, Naka brings *Sonic Heroes* back to its gameplay roots by dropping the "adventure"

aspect from both the game's title and design philosophy. Hands-on impressions reveal that the game has practically zero exploration, with players running, jumping, and attacking enemies strewn along the course. The twist here is that, while jamming from point A to B with a three-member party, players can now tap the special abilities of Sonic and his friends, on-the-fly, by switching the party's main (and controllable) character.

Excitement levels remain muted, if only for the fact that Sega plans to bring *Heroes* to all platforms in an effort to maximize the blue critter's waning profitability. Furthermore, one has to wonder whether Sega truly understands the Xbox's skew towards a more mature audience. Expect no true Xbox extras, except perhaps the obligatory downloadable content (which has yet to be announced) via Xbox Live
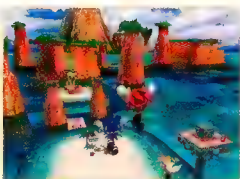
STEEL BATTALION: LINE OF CONTACT

Dev: Capcom
Pub: Capcom

☐ Release: Fall 2003
☐ Origin: Japan

Although a breakthrough title in its own right, *Steel Battalion*'s vivid universe and too-good-to-be-true controller simply begged for more replay value. Behold *Steel Battalion: Line of Contact*, Capcom's ambitious online edition for this 40-ton mech sim which gives up to 10 players the chance to battle their mechs on Xbox Live. Initial impressions are that if you take away the new mechs, the custom logos and paintjobs, the headset communications, and the exciting possibility of a persistent online world where the balance of power is constantly shifting, *Contact* is essentially the same game—only now it's online. But then again, is that so bad?

Have a scope around, try to find Dr. Caplan

ALIAS

Dev: Acclaim Cheltenham
Pub: Acclaim

Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: England

Let's face it: the TV show *Alias* and its lead actress Jennifer Garner are both hotter than a tamale on the sun. Snatching the license for this game was a great feather in the collective cap of Acclaim, and the hope is its videogame translation will be some crazy-cool action adventure worth its weight in ass-kicking goodness.

Players control agent Sydney Bristow, a CIA operative out to whack Arvin Sloane, the figurehead of an evil organization SD-6. The game's story is being penned by the show's writers,

and promises to be true to the series that birthed it. As Bristow, it will be possible to don various disguises to fool guards and such.

Alias was shown at May's E3 show, and though its animations seemed stilted, the game held some interesting features, notably, a split-screen that showed the action from Bristow's point-of-view, as well as the enemies who were closing in on her position. Combat included some smooth moves as well, with our heroine able to flip off a wall and land behind her (quite surprised) enemies.

Dev: Human Head
Pub: Atari Games
Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: Madison, WI

Using the latest technology from the *Unreal* series, *Dead Man's Hand* is an FPS set in the lawless days of the Old West. Shooting dirty dogs online and offline: fun for the entire family.

Dev: Black Ops
Pub: Atari Games
Expected Release: Fall 2004
Origin: Santa Monica, CA

Play as the T-800 and blow stuff up. What could be better? Well, how about exclusive film footage created specifically for the game. Not enough? How about 20 modern-day weapons!

Dev: MGM Interactive
Pub: Electronic Arts
Expected Release: Winter 2003
Origin: Los Angeles, CA

Do you trust MGM—the movie company—to make good games? Well, it makes very little difference, as EA has just signed a contract to pump these suckers out until 2010. Happy Bonding!

Dev: EA Black Box
Pub: Electronic Arts
Expected Release: Spring 2004
Origin: Canada

2 fast and 2 furiously 2 many street racing clones are hitting the Xbox. But who cares, because while *Underground* will be online for the PC and PS2, Xbox Live users get to look on in envy. Weak.

Dev: Konami
Pub: Konami
Expected Release: October 2003
Origin: Japan

With "hot licensed songs" and downloadable content via Xbox Live, could *Ultramix* be the best version of *DDR*, America's favorite dance simulator? Wait, don't answer that.

Dev: Idol FX
Pub: Majesco Games
Expected Release: November 2003
Origin: Scandinavia

Drake is John Woo-double-fisted-*Matrix*-visualized-gunplay meets the animated veneer of the *Batman* cartoons, meets third-person action shooters. It looks like a promising romp.

Dev: Namco
Pub: Namco
Expected Release: Winter 2003
Origin: San Jose, CA

The latest in a slew of military shooters to recently hit consoles, *kill.switch* is a surprisingly engaging action title loaded with gameplay features. Too bad it looks a tad bland.

Dev: EA Vancouver
Pub: EA
Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: Vancouver, Canada

With 112 people, *FIFA*'s development team is one of the largest ever constructed. With new animations and ball-physics models, this looks to set a new standard for the sport.
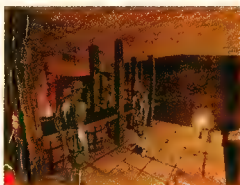
Dev: Arkane Studios
Pub: Dreamcatcher
Expected Release: Winter 2003
Origin: France

"Arx," sayeth the flacks, "is an underground urban environment." So players will travel to Arx in this first-person action RPG and experience much "Fatalis," or dying. Muy bueno!

Dev: Headfirst Productions
Pub: Bethesda
Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: England

This horror game was one of the best Xbox games shown at E3. It's inspired by writer H.P. Lovecraft, and features first-person action with hideous monsters, plus atmosphere aplenty.

Dev: EA LA
Pub: EA
Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: Los Angeles, CA

The in-game demo at E3 was impressive, with clever, scripted gameplay sequences and explosive particle effects aplenty. The corny, jingoistic ending, however, stunk like rotten cabbage.

Dev: SCi Interactive
Pub: Gotham Games
Expected Release: Fall 2003
Origin: England

Proving that nothing is sacred, *Back to Baghdad* develops a what-if scenario about U.S. troops being sent into Iraq immediately following the expulsion of Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Dev: Frontier Development
Pub: Bam! Entertainment
Expected Release: October 2003
Origin: England

This game looks exactly like the claymation cartoons that inspired it, has cool gadgets aplenty, and enough good humor to almost certainly please fans of the series.
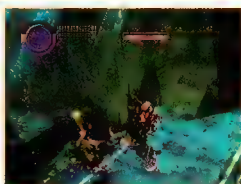
Dev: High Voltage Software
Pub: Vivendi/Universal Interactive
Expected Release: October 2003
Origin: Hoffman Estates, IL

The *Hunter* series gets bigger, badder, and better with five playable hunters, 40 different killifying weapons, Xbox Live downloadables, new camera angles, and to 30 on-screen monsters at once.

Dev: Ion Storm
Pub: Eidos
Expected Release: Fall 2004
Origin: Austin, TX

Using a customized version of the engine behind *Deus Ex 2*, *Thief* looks to once again rewrite the rulebook for stealth gameplay. Expect great atmosphere and excellent lighting effects.

Dev: Black Ops
Pub: Microsoft
Expected Release: Fall 2004
Origin: Redmond, WA

With a surprisingly impressive showing at this year's E3, *Top Spin* sports extremely impressive character models, textures, and animation. And, joyously, one sultry Anna Kournikova.

TRAINING DAY

More than just a recruitment tool, Pandemic's real-time strategy shooter Full Spectrum Warrior actually trains U.S. troops in the ways of urban warfare—and it's a kick-ass game to boot

Words: Che Chou

In a nameless war-torn Middle Eastern city, an army Black Hawk chopper lowers itself into hostile territory, touching down only long enough to deploy its squad of nine fire-team members before thundering off again into smoke-filled skies. On orders from squad leader Garnett, Bravo team scrambles to the corner of a nearby mosque while Alpha team members scan the landing zone down the noses of their M4 service rifles. Suddenly, the sharp snap of small-arms fire from an enemy's AK-47 cuts through the hot, dusty air, ricocheting huge chunks of plaster and concrete off the helmets of Bravo team's automatic rifleman and grenadier. Garnett sounds off on his machine gunner to spray suppressing fire while Alpha bounds—two by two—through the mosque and into flanking position. Somebody yells, "Wait for the reload, Alpha!" and in mere seconds, a man collapses in a puddle of blood behind the shattered remains of a burnt-out car.

Fifteen minutes and countless spent casings later, a shell-shocked audience of journalists emerges from the game demo held in a camouflage tent, ready to lay their professional credibility on the line to evangelize *Full Spectrum Warrior*, one of the true breakout Xbox exclusives at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo.

■ By tapping in a direction on the D-pad, players can fine-tune movement and covering fire for individual soldiers in a team. Note the realistic (and quite limited) ammo loadout for every squad member.

Full Spectrum Warrior

Developer: Pandemic Studios
Publisher: THQ
Expected Release: Spring 2004
Origin: Santa Monica, CA
Online: Yes

All the ballyhoo surrounding the Army's venture into the realm of video entertainment culminates with *Full Spectrum Warrior*, hands-down the most realistic infantry simulator ever made. Commissioned by the Army for the training of its soldiers, the game presents an authentic and responsible portrait of war.

Even with all its technological ingenuity and firepower, America's awesome military machine lacks creative verve when it comes to mass destruction on a shoestring budget. What, jetliners as human-controlled fuel bombs? Never in a million years. Which is why in the days following 9/11, Army and intelligence officials tapped novelists in the civilian sector for inspiration on all the bizarre ways terrorists could take out major cities with little more than their faith and frequent trips to Home Depot. One such "think tank" charged with supplying the Army with a sense of imagination is the Institute for Creative Technologies, a joint venture between the military and the University of Southern California. "The army is very much a culture," says Wil Stahl, project director for *Full Spectrum Warrior* at Pandemic Studios. "Within that culture, they're very bright. But they lack other perspectives." Such outside perspectives, Stahl says, included contracting devel-

"*Warrior* is really like a first-person RTS. **You're right there in the thick of things**." — Wil Stahl, project director

oper Pandemic to create technology to simultaneously train and entertain soldiers.

Combat Evolved
Now, in a time when originality in games is seemingly at an all-time low, it's ironically the U.S. Army that's been a major driving force behind one of Xbox's most promising and exclusive

titles yet: *Warrior*, an intense real-time strategy game set in the urban hell of America's favorite Middle-Eastern flashpoints. The soul of *Warrior* is ingeniously simple and at once gripping: make a 3D RTS game from the perspective of the grunts on the frontlines, as opposed to the isometric god-like view established by classic games such as *Populous* on the PC. With *Warrior's* claustrophobic over-the-shoulder steady cam as the only source of intelligence for players in the midst of a firefight, limitations such as line-of-sight and urban fog-of-war work themselves nicely into the gameplay. "I almost hesitate to use the term," Stahl says, "but *Warrior* is really like a first-person RTS. You're right there in the thick of things, but still calling the shots."

As such, players control a team of nine G.I.s, but with little micromanagement of the actual soldiers themselves. These A.I. fighters handle themselves in a manner befitting well-trained U.S soldiers, hitting the dirt, covering their sectors, and returning fire when appropriate. It's the player's job to direct

their tactical actions. Both teams of a squad function closely with each other, supporting and flanking enemies as they flush out hostile environments. Stahl points out, "If a squad leader is shooting his gun, then he's not doing his job." Said job, of course, is to keep his team alive by providing tactical direction during combat.

Conditions of War
The genesis of *Warrior* as a lifelike, in-your-face RTS began as an idea Stahl had on his honeymoon three years ago. "I was reading the book *Black Hawk Down*—bad idea to do on your honeymoon, by the way—and I just thought it'd be cool to do a tactical RTS from the perspective of these soldiers." Still, the boys over at Pandemic understood publishers weren't exactly clamoring for original ideas, and that a first-person style "shooter" where players weren't actually doing any of the shooting simply wasn't going to fly with the suits. Fortunately for Stahl, a cocktail of luck and coincidence brought Pandemic to the attention of the ICT, which was then looking for a

■ How to evacuate wounded soldiers in *FSW*: 1) Find a suitable plot of space big enough to land a Black Hawk. 2) Secure the landing zone. 3) Watch said helicopter crash and burn from enemy rockets

game developer to create a U.S. Army training simulator. "We were very fortunate. The current atmosphere within games is very risk adverse," Stahl says. "It was liberating as a designer to work with the Army on its needs, because it has no preconceived commercial notion of what a game should be." This tabula rasa afforded Pandemic the opportunity to flesh out Stahl's kernel of a first-person RTS. The Army's only requirements were that the simulator had to be authentic, accessible, and compelling, and that it be anything but a first-person shooter.

"The skill transfer of shooting a gun in real life versus shooting a gun in a videogame is minimal," Matthew Norton, producer for *Warrior* at Pandemic says. "Moving a mouse around really doesn't teach you how to shoot a gun. What you can learn in *FSW* is tactical awareness. Once you put a gun in someone's hands, they're tempted to just go Rambo. That's not what the Army is about." Norton explains that the real goal of *Warrior* is to condition the average soldier—some 18-year-old kid straight out of basic

training who may never get the opportunity to act as a squad leader—to be tactically aware. The game introduces everyday infantry to the thought process and mindset of what it is to be a squad leader, directing your men and processing information on the fly, under pressure. "We can't simulate all the subtleties," Norton says, "but it's at least a first exposure to them in terms of thinking, 'Well shit, there is a big difference between being out in the open and being under cover.'"

By mid-July, Pandemic will have assembled the ultimate urban combat sandbox for the Army, which will soon mandate that an Xbox and a copy of the game be standard issue in barracks and recreation centers everywhere (score one for Microsoft). "We're going to be doing some substantial modifications to various systems (in the Army version) for the mainstream release," Stahl says. "More than half the technology here now is tools dedicated to assessing combat effectiveness for the military." And because the Army version is essentially a freeform sandbox—loaded with stats

and skirmish editors, and devoid of any context, narrative, or linear mission structure—Pandemic is spending the rest of its development cycle on beefing up the console version's story and the single-player experience.

The Real Life of G.I. Joes

"In terms of story, our goal is to keep it very realistic, making sure that there's a logical progression," Stahl says. "A squad's not going to have an arctic mission in the snow, then a desert mission, and then a jungle mission. That's just not what happens in real life." Instead, *Warrior* will focus on violent events transpiring within one (as yet unnamed) city in the Middle East that a company of U.S. troops has to suppress. "The entire game will probably take place within a 24-hour period, whereby each mission could be an hour of time in the game world—kind of like the TV show," Stahl explains. As for characters, *Warrior* will be populated by a legion of personalities, all of which players can handpick for their squad. While the total number of missions has yet to be decided, Stahl

described a Campaign mode in which soldiers who survive each sortie grow through experience and develop bonds of camaraderie with fellow squadmates. "For the story elements, we want to make you feel like you're playing an interactive movie," he says. "You'll see characters develop over time and how they interact with each other. You'll see the effects of what happens when a guy loses his buddy. You're managing a team, and you're pushing them through this world, all the while watching these emergent relationships develop."

Stahl took extra care to point out that these psychological factors play a significant role, not just as story-based drama behind layers of frothing tactical action but also as important gameplay modifiers. Soldiers under mental duress—whether it's from losing a friend, getting pinned down, or catching a piece of shrapnel in the belly—will perform visibly worse during combat. "Almost all of our game is data driven," Stahl says. "Meaning all of the soldiers have internal switches: shot variance, accuracy, reaction
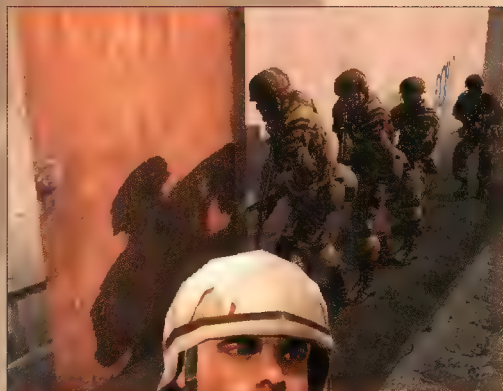
Whoever he may be, we do not want to be the poor mofo on the other side of this door.

"Even worse than not being totally authentic is **we can potentially cause countertraining**."

time—all things that are calculated on the fly individually." As the squad leader, players need to manage resources spontaneously. Do they leave the automatic rifleman—who's shaken from having just lost his buddy—on the frontal assault team, or pull him back into the cover team? And if he's pulled back, does he handoff his heavy machine gun to someone who hasn't had as much experience with a squad-automatic weapon? All of these strategic factors need to be processed immediately during a fast-paced firefight.

"The army made it very clear to us that these guys need to be people that you care about," Norton says. "They aren't meat shields, nor are they disposable. When an 18-year-old kid takes a bullet, there's no reloading a saved game. He's going home in a body bag and his mom is getting a really unpleasant letter." This emotional hook translates seamlessly into gameplay attributes. Players need to observe their men's behavior to tell whether they're wounded, soiling their fatigues out of fear and panic, or just plain pissed that their squad leader's inane decisions are getting them shot up. "The player doesn't have some sort of fear or reaction meter, and his wounded men don't have red auras around them," Norton says. "It's more realistic and works a lot better than having some kind of artificial game-like meter on the screen."

Life in the Big City
If the true hero of *Warrior* is the collective personas that make up the squad, then the antagonist in this bloody tactical affair is the fictitious city itself and all of its dynamic inhabitants. Civilians

begin the campaign as neutral, supporting neither the United States' claims of liberation nor picking up arms to side with extremist guerilla factions. "Any civilian can become an enemy," Stahl says. "It's just a matter of whether I've done something to piss them off. It happens in the real world and it happens in the game." Stahl describes the pacing of *Warrior* as strangely similar to quiet, creeping horror mainstays such as *Resident Evil*, where uncertain death lurks around every corner. "If I go through an area aggressively and I just start killing civilians indiscriminately, it's going to create a lot of hostility," he says. Angry civilians can turn the tide of battle when they come across abandoned weapons by using them against the player at the most inopportune times.

The layout of the city itself is also labyrinthine and complex, giving players and enemies alike plenty of cover for concealed movement and ambushes. Although its total size has yet to be determined, Stahl and Norton assert that missions will feature between 15

to 20 square blocks of open, nonlinear urban environments for players to customize their own gauntlet runs. In addition, many buildings will also have fully modeled interiors, providing fertile ground for the kicking in of doors, throwing of flashbang grenades, and boisterous bellowing of the phrase, "Go, go, go!"

Truth and Consequences
More significant than any technical accomplishment in the field of environments, A.I., and gameplay, however, is *Warrior*'s notion of a responsible military simulator. The game adopts, as its core philosophy, the loftiest ideals of the U.S. Army. These military tenets stress the all-important rules of engagement, which serve as a conscience filter for soldiers in any given situation. They teach combatants to scan for civilians and innocents before pulling the trigger; to only fire when fired upon; to secure abandoned weapons from fallen foes so that civilians don't go blowing their hands off from an accidental discharge; and to avoid firing upon religious and culturally important landmarks.

These ethical limitations work their way into the game through a unique system of "command status" points, which players are rewarded or penalized in real-time as they progress. "As I do things that break my rules of engagement," Stahl says, "My command status diminishes, which limits me in the extra assets that are available during the mission, whether they be air strikes, surveillance, or casualty evacuations."

Stahl describes a situation in which a squad has spotted hostiles in the region, but they're hunkered down in

front of a mosque. Sure, they could open up full force with their automatic weapons, but were the player to unleash their fury on a religious structure—which to the Army is a major political faux pas—he or she would, in the purest sense of the game, lose command status and the respect of his or her squad. By making players realize there are consequences to irresponsible action during war, *Warrior* will be sensitizing a generation of gamers weaned on *Doom*, *Duke Nukem*, and Hollywood bravado to the very real issue of innocents getting caught in the crossfire.

For Stahl and Norton, who compare their three-year collaboration with numerous military experts to an extended stint in a mental boot camp (Stahl even barks like an Army sergeant), *Warrior* is a lot more than just an innovative and captivating RTS. The game is meticulous about the most minute military detail, doctrine, and procedure because real lives are at stake. "Even worse than not being totally authentic or realistic is that we can potentially cause countertraining, where if we do something wrong, it could be that we teach a lesson incorrectly," Norton says. "The squad leader could go out there and get somebody killed. We can't afford to train anyone incorrectly." ∎

Live Ammunition
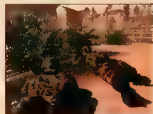
With a strategy game as intense and robust as *Full Spectrum Warrior*, Pandemic no doubt sees the title's incredible online potential. "Right now, we're planning on implementing a co-op campaign mode for people to play online," says *Warrior*'s producer Matthew Norton. When asked whether the game would feature any head-to-head action, Norton was less certain. "We're unsure how that would work," he says. "Essentially, each player would have two game pieces (teams), and when they meet you would have a battle. Right now we're not sure how interesting that would be, but you never know."

"AFTER A TERRORIST ATTACK
YOUR FIRST INSTINCT MAY BE TO RUN.
THAT MAY BE THE WORST THING
YOU COULD DO."

Knowing what you should do in a terrorist attack isn't just a matter of common sense. It takes some reading, some learning and some planning. That goes for people who live in small communities too. Readiness is for every American family, business and school. The terrorist threat is real and we can't afford to go unprepared.

Learn about together an emergency supply kit, how to make a family communication plan, and how you should respond to an act of terror. All of the information is clearly explained at www.ready.gov. If you prefer, you can call 1-800-BE-READY (1-800-237-3239) for a free copy of the brochure, "Preparing Makes Sense. Get Ready Now."

READY

Vivendi/Universal's *Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter*

How we rate

Being a single-format magazine, we at *Xbox Nation* find ourselves in the difficult situation of critiquing games which reside on Xbox, while not blinding ourselves to the sphere of console gaming surrounding it, either. We will make a point to put each game in context of both its platform and videogames at large, whenever possible.

Our scale is a rigid one to 10; in an industry where the independent spirit is often kicked maliciously to the curb, and games are often prematurely rushed out the door in the name of quarterly earnings, we believe it's an important time to be critical. And while the burden certainly weighs heavily upon our shoulders as reviewers, it is infinitely heavier on the consumers' backs. In this day of shallow profit margins, wallets speak volumes. Allow us to break it down for the folks in the cheap seats: One is video feces. Two is trash. Three is junk. Four is sub-par. Five is average. Six is slightly above. Seven is very solid. Eight's a real gem. Nine is amazing. Ten is *Halo*.

Our most important requirement is that a game bring something new to the table. And yet, while innovative forms of interaction come first, we don't scoff at technology so cutting edge it makes our noses bleed or gameplay that refines a pre-existing formula into something so supple it bleeds itself, either. Titles failing to distinguish themselves in one of these crucial ways are—in our opinion—quite easily dismissed, especially at 50 bucks a pop.

ENTER THE DISAPPOINTMENT
Buying into the dream costs plenty

Upon entrance, it was clear the only recourse was exit. *Enter The Matrix*, long in development and riding an enormous wave of pre-release hype, promised the sun and moon but delivered only a flaming ball of mediocrity whose fire faded before too long. *Xbox Nation* has passed a grade on what could have been David Perry and Shiny's greatest work, and that grade can be found on page 78. We are nothing if not proponents of surprise.

Now, the questions remain. Did *Enter the Matrix* score as it did because it lacks key elements or because it did not deliver on its many promises? Did the game lose points for not living up to its hype? It's interesting to ponder these; although reviewers strive to be as objective as possible, there is absolutely no way to eliminate the human factor from a critique ..

That said, *XBN* puts its human touch on another promise waiting to be kept, Microsoft's *Brute Force*, as well as other highly anticipated titles such as *Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter*, *Midtown Madness 3*, and *Hulk*. The hope is, as always, for every game that comes through, that it delivers, and that it delivers in a big way. But while hope springs eternal, reality, like a banana creme pie, often smacks us in the face.

Such, as they say, is life.

BRUTE FORCE
Microsoft's highly anticipated sci-fi shooter is Novocain for the mind
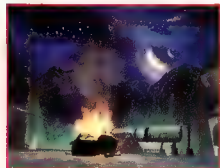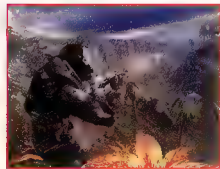
■ Is anything more beautiful than a mutant bonfire cast under the pale luminance of a double moon? We think not.

The verdict is in: *Brute Force*, which once graced the cover of *Xbox Nation* (issue #6) and lands on Xbox this summer with the bombast of a mindless blockbuster, is good solid fun—but given the hype, it's also painfully underwhelming. Never mind Microsoft's deliberate attempt to have *Brute Force* ride the coattails of Bungie's trump card by packing in a *Halo* companion DVD; the *Halo* comparisons, which seemed relatively apt at the preview stage late last year, seem silly and overly optimistic in retrospect. *Brute Force* is nothing like *Halo*. In fact, it's the un-*Halo*.

The easiest way to sum up *Brute Force*, Microsoft's long-awaited, third-person, sci-fi shooter that takes squad-based tactics as its twist and focus, is to say that it's heavy on technology and light on design. This evaluation is evident in every aspect of the game, ranging from its by-the-numbers character concepts and invisible plot to its ho-hum environments and unoriginal weapons.

The story centers on four intergalactic supersoldiers charged with nothing less than saving the universe from an imminent alien invasion. But the game's disjointed structure does very little to make you care about its narrative. While the first four missions tickle players' fancies with some impressive intro CG movies, every mission (a total of 18) thereafter begins with a dull mission-briefing sequence dripping with laughably bad dialogue.

To make matters worse, *Brute Force* features some of the most flaccid enemy designs seen in a long while. One level throws players headlong into a flesh-eating mutant colony where, at the level's climax, they face a "super mutant" whose only discerning feature is green (instead of beige) skin and can absorb more damage than its counterparts. Several other stages pit you against human bosses who possess no ability other than that they, too, can take more bullets than their henchman.

The game's lack of overall inspiration extends beyond bland characters. The entire experience takes place over five main environments repeated about four times each. While initially there are plenty of graphical niceties to admire, the awe factor diminishes with repeated visits.

What it basically boils down to is total

player apathy for *Brute Force*'s story, characters, and overall game structure. Luckily, however, the game rides mostly on its excellent controls and challenging enemy A.I., and action fans will find there's plenty of satisfaction to be had when a plan comes together. The firefights are intense. The game's physics system ensures no two enemies are dispatched the same way. Throw a grenade over cover and watch as unlucky foes take to the skies with arms and legs flailing. Enemies also take cover, attack in groups, and ambush unsuspecting players with surprising tenacity.

■ Here the Brute Force task force poses, thousand-yard-stare and all, for a team photo before eradicating evil on a lava-filled planet. But inquiring minds want to know: Do lizards need combat diapers?

The *Halo* comparisons seem silly in retrospect. **Brute Force** is nothing like *Halo*. In fact, **it's the un-*Halo***.

But the main gameplay appeal—coordinated attacks with your group of four squad members—never truly sells itself. Tactical opportunities come only as often as the level designs allow, and unfortunately, much of the game forces players down a linear path of attrition. As such, teammates often feel like extra lives—handy to have around, but ultimately unimportant to the overall goal of each mission.

Still, as far as dumb action gaming goes, *Brute Force* is a lot of fun, thanks mostly to its satisfying controls. It's just too bad the game is riddled with unre-

alized potential—the most glaring being its lack of Xbox Live support. With a throwaway single-player campaign and short-sighted, options-starved versus modes (what, death-match only?), *Brute Force* is the perfect candidate for Xbox Live.

As it is, the game has many excellent moments but never manages to reach a peak, leaving players asking themselves as the end credits roll, "Was that it?" If you can accept it for a thick summer blockbuster, *Brute Force* will prove to be a solid shooter, but one that will leave you gasping for originality.
Che Chou

Six out of Ten

■ The organic sensor, an item you receive later on in the game, is an invaluable tool for firefights in the dark. Unfortunately, you only really need to use it in a couple areas in the game.

The Real Brute Force

Before big bad Brutus was even a twinkle in his mother's reptilian eyes, there was *Brute Force*—the arcade game. Developed by Leland Corporation back in 1991, *Brute Force* puts players in the soccer shorts and muscle shirts of Krush, Buzz, and Snake as they take on skinheads and ninjas in "Big City U.S.A." Like the game so elegantly puts it, "Don't stop kickin' till the beat goes down."

MIDNIGHT CLUB II
Join the club

In a strange and futuristic world, the mean streets navigate shiny cars and all is never what it seems.

There are basically two types of racing games. The first is an asphalt junkie's wet dream, in which real-world physics are married to traditional track layouts, providing the closest approximation anyone with a class "C" license will ever get to actual road racing. Add to this the option to customize anything from gear ratios to camber angles, and you have more than enough material to assure morning wood for any self-respecting gearhead. The other type of racing game takes all of the aforementioned, tried-and-true, time-tested gameplay elements and summarily throws them out the window.

Rockstar's *Midnight Club II* falls into the second category; it contains no real-life tracks and absolutely zero internal adjustments. But Rockstar San Diego has redoubled its efforts for this sophomore offering to make *Club 2* useful for more than just filling out your DVD shelf.

Imagine, if you will, a virtual cityscape spanning hundreds of city blocks filled with traffic, law enforcement, landmarks, and moving targets (or "pedestrians"). Now add to the mix anywhere from two to eight nearly recognizable unlicensed facsimiles of your favorite souped-up rice rockets, or even motorcycles, throw in more than a dozen checkpoints and no set route to them, and you have, in a nutshell, *Club II*. Here, the simplicity of control

Here, Christine's kid sister Wilhemina tries to look all scary with headlights and a fancy paint job. It's the trash compactor for you, you demonically possessed hunk of steel!

Finishing anything but first means that one, **you're a loser**, and two, you'll be running that race over and over...

works in concert with the nuance required to race through back alleys, over rooftops, on two wheels through rush-hour traffic, and the wrong way down a freeway...all while battling it out with some of the toughest A.I. encountered in a racer to date.

Finishing anything but first will mean that one, you are a loser, and two, you will be running that race over and over again until you can outdrive the other cars to the finish. All that pressure will leave your controller sweatier than Elvis during a concert and render you more frustrated than when you tried to put the square block in the round hole in preschool.

While *Club II* does raise the bar for arcade-style racing, it falters in the audio department. The game skips on one of the best features of the Xbox, a custom soundtrack, and instead sports overly repetitive, clichéd, and annoying voice acting. If your driving skills aren't up to par, expect to make several hundred attempts before advancing to the next race. This means without making a few tweaks to the audio options, you may soon wish for euthanasia.

Although the game wavers in areas, it makes up for them with addictive gameplay, smooth framerates, and challenging A.I. that does more than beeline from checkpoint to checkpoint
David Ziganay

Midnight Club 2 is the latest racer to make the leap to online competitive play. Players can choose from various games modes, including a variation on capture the flag (except with cars!). There is also an open cruise mode where races can be run from one end of town to the other, or just from one red light to the next.

The war of the reds versus the yellows ended with the death of 362 pedestrians. In addition, an old lady was scared into spilling her coffee, sued McDonalds, and now lives in a solid-gold house.

Eight out of Ten

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE II: DOUBLE HELIX

Dev: Gratuitous Games
Pub: Activision
Players: 1-10

Soldiers. Of Misfortune
Origin San Diego, CA
Online: Yes

The doctors discovered there was no cure for Boogie Fever and, sadly, no treatment for the Down Payment Blues

If someone were to ask why it hurts the Xbox to have a library comprised mostly of crunky old PC games, all you'd need to do is boot up *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix* with its blocky, ugly, and choppy graphics, and vapid game designs to prove the point. This is as stock and uninteresting as it gets, nothing more than the staple prescripted key/switch hunt you've already seen 100 times.

Helix's seemingly epic single-player campaign takes you from the drizzly streets of Prague, to the humid jungles of Colombia for the glory of ultraviolence. Although shooting your enemies in the face can, depending on your disposition, prove supremely satisfying, *Helix* gives you very little context within which to do such inhuman harm. All that matters in every level is that you throw a few switches, mangle a bunch of imbeciles, and move on to the next pointless cut-scene. Even the game's one redeeming quality—the option to save anywhere, anytime—is easily abused, no thanks to *Helix*'s aggravating trial-and-error gameplay.

Some may argue *Helix*'s online

deathmatch modes makes up for its lackluster solo campaign—and they may be right. It seems that with Xbox Live and its excellent Communicator headset, any game featuring the Live logo automatically wins points in a review. Yet, the question remains: With *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*'s superb

online action already available on Xbox, how many team-based FPS titles does the console need?
Che Chou

Four out of Ten

WAKEBOARDING UNLEASHED: FEATURING SHAUN MURRAY

Dev Shaba Studios
Pub: Activision
Players : 1-2

Waking: Shaun Murray
Origin: San Francisco, CA
Online: No

Nothing says romance like plowing through the canals of Venice dragged by a speedboat going 300 mph.

With no regard for subtlety, Activision has shamelessly milked its own line of "Pro" extreme sports games, though none more so than the genre-defining *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* series. And in Activision's favor, a solid evolutionary device was introduced with each iteration of said series, ultimately arriving at a free-roaming game structure. Ironic, then, that its latest entry in the extreme-sports genre not only foregoes the "Pro" moniker, but also does away with the open-ended nature found in its most recent extreme games, a feature many view as the next logical step in extreme-sports game design.

But in a showcase of double irony, the return of a run-based level design is a large part of what makes *Wakeboarding Unleashed* a success. While not strictly time-based—a Groove meter remains filled as combos are executed—the urgency resulting from a more linear format is exactly what keeps a player's motivation level high.

The recipe for the game's winning formula is twofold. the brilliant water physics and the dynamics of rope play. These are more than just clever

gimmicks randomly added for effect. Mastering the flowing wake and the timing of the releasable dragging rope are essential to progressing in the game. And as a pivotal aspect of the game's design, it's lucky the physics find a perfect balance of realism and restraint. *Unleashed* reveals a seemingly

regressive approach in its design, but the game's unique nuances take it from one step back to two steps to the side.
Ginho Park

Seven out of Ten

ENTER THE MATRIX
Take the blue pill. Better yet, take the whole bottle.

■ Driving scenes allow the player to control either the driver or the gunner, depending on which character (Niobe or Ghost) is being used. Unfortunately, neither of these two options is pulled off especially well.

"Choice," Neo observes in *The Matrix Reloaded.* "The problem is choice." The significance of this statement as it pertains to videogames is vast: The argument has been made that because of their uncontrolled nature—namely, the sheer randomness of the player's choices—videogames can never truly be considered art. That they give up authorial intent and drama in favor of messy, unpredictable human interference. Sadly, *Enter the Matrix* does very little to help counter this argument.

In flashes, the game shows promise. The implementation of Bullet Time is impressive, with slow-motion acrobatics and pyrotechnics serving to moisten the palate of nearly anyone who picks up the controller. Likewise, the concept of a story that intersects and complements its cinematic counterpart is one that will surely be mimicked for years to come.

The game fails, however, and fails dramatically. At times, it's laughable; at others, merely passable. Severe, fundamental flaws permeate the experience, ranging from wince-inducing run-cycle animations to sloppy, unrefined controls. Painfully literal "glitches in the Matrix" abound, continually breaking whatever spell might exist over the player. And yet these scattered defects merely hint at the heart of the problem.

Ultimately, the most disappointing factor here is the mysterious lack of artistic intent. Rough technical edges merely fan the fire of mediocre game and level design, it seems, simply an outgrowth of some deep-seated lack of creative inspiration or breathing room. Rather than transforming the *Matrix* universe—perhaps the most videogame-centric physical and psychological playground Hollywood has ever produced—into the interactive realm, *Enter the Matrix* is a simple, straightforward shooter, with B-grade cut-scenes bookending each punch/kick/shoot action scene. Variations in gameplay come in the form of driving and hovercrafting scenes; unfortunately, these escapes are derivative of such genre travesties as *Test Drive 4* and *Microcosm*.

Unlike Electronic Arts' considerably more polished *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, Enter the Matrix* cannot simply survive on slick presentation. Shifts between interactive gameplay and passive story segments are often painfully jarring; moving from chop-

■ The most impressive aspect of *Enter the Matrix* is the engine's ability to transition smoothly between hand-to-hand and weapons-based combat. In Bullet Time, the effect is particularly slick

Rough technical edges merely fan the fire of mediocre game and level design...

socky button mashing, to an in-engine cut-scene, to live-action film footage and back again without context or visual transition is ineffective. And within these awkward confines, the game's rickety storyline becomes utterly devoid of drama or emotion.

Atari's main objective with *Enter the Matrix* was to achieve history's single largest commercial videogame success, and the manner in which it has attempted to do so has come at a price Perhaps the most incisive technical flaw comes in the form of a control setup that has been tailored for marketing departments' imagined "lowest common denominator"—specifically, those who have not played a videogame since *Donkey Kong.* (This is, of course, faulty logic; as games from *Asteroids* to *Halo* have effectively proven, even "the masses" have the capacity to simultaneously juggle control over multiple axes.) From the moment one picks up the Xbox pad and feels the weight of a blunt, mismanaged control scheme in which one merely steers a character on a single plane rather than guiding it through 3D space, it becomes quite clear that this is a game designed to be

■ The Xbox version of the game has been optimized for 1080i, which means that fortunate owners of a compliant HDTV set can take solace in the fact that they are able to watch the game's repetitive textures and sloppy animations in supercrisp detail.

immediately accessible rather than ultimately fulfilling. Eschewing dual-analog control in favor of a simplified *Tomb Raider*-style faux-3D scheme simply limits the depth of the experience.

It's difficult to lay blame for the orgy of bugs, glitches, and overall shallowness marring Shiny's gameworld at nearly every turn. It seems to rest somewhere between mismanaged development cycles, misguided publisher goals, a preoccupied/unqualified pair of Wachowskis, and a staunchly inflexible release date. Whatever the case, *Enter the Matrix*'s world is an extremely buggy one. And given the simplicity of its gameplay, such rough edges are simply unacceptable.
Evan Shamoon

Three out of Ten

The saga continues...

Two Shiny sequels and an MMORPG. In a pear tree.
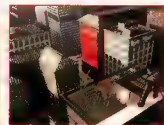
Rumors have recently surfaced that Monolith Productions' (*Sanity: Aiken's Artifact*, *Tron 2.0*) upcoming *Matrix Online* MMORPG will indeed see life on Xbox. The game, to be published by Ubi Soft and scheduled for release on PC in early 2004, takes place after *The Matrix Revolutions*. How the online world and Wachowski-conceived storyline will work is not yet clear. Atari has also announced that Shiny's sequel to *Enter the Matrix* will see release in fall 2004 (a full year after the *Revolutions* movie), with a sequel to follow in 2006.

MIDTOWN MADNESS 3

Ah...beautiful Paris! How we love to tear up your streets.

Here are cars (or "automobiles"). Cars are a staple of the car-based game *Midtown Madness 3*. That's all we have to say on the topic of cars.
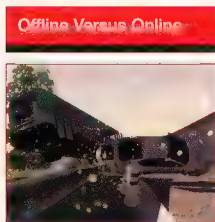
Midtown Madness 3 comes hot on the heels of Rockstar's urban racer, *Midnight Club II*, and though they're ripe for comparison, the *Midtown* series has been renowned for establishing huge open cityscapes since its PC debut in 1999. *Madness* eschews the Vin Diesel-inspired speed and shenanigans of *Club* for a slightly slower, more brusque approach to rush hour. Forget trying to weave through traffic—play God behind the driver's wheel and plow right through these lowly creations.

Madness gives players the ability to drive all manner of real-life automobiles (both sexy and unsexy) through the dense metropolitan playgrounds of Paris and Washington, D.C., while forcing them to compete against both A.I. opponents and relentless environmental obstacles. Both massive cities—bustling with pedestrians, rush-hour traffic, and visual landmarks—are feasts for the eyes. But after the graphical novelty's lost its luster, the biggest flaw in *Madness'* solo game is simply that it's repetitive. The single-player missions are concerned mainly with checkpoints and errands (pick stuff up, drop stuff off), with little variety in between. There's a silly storyline bristling with bad voice acting stringing together all these looney objectives, but anything remotely worth a chuckle the first time quickly begins to grate on the 10th retry.

The prototype *Enterprise* did not perform as well as expected, killing both Warren Kirk and Edgar Spock, as well as horribly maiming nearby Scotsman Mervin "Skippy" Scott.

Midtown Madness 3 feels like a shiny new version of *Crazy Taxi*, **only this time, infinitely less deep**...

The other problem is that there's little incentive for the player to drive with any sort of skill or finesse. Most of the time, *Madness* feels like a shiny new version of Sega's *Crazy Taxi*, only this time, infinitely less deep. There are no bonuses for driving defensively or offensively, as players need only concern themselves only with getting to the goal under the time limit.

Understandably, *Madness* is a racer about vehicular insanity—hence, its over-the-top gameplay and imaginary physics. But the game's lack of skill-based incentives, whether it's style points or even collision kudos, makes getting from point A to B feel rather shallow—and ultimately repetitious.

Thankfully, there's always Xbox Live to save the day. Like most online games, the more participants, the merrier the chaos in *Madness*. Standouts among the handful of game modes available online include Hunter, in which one player slowly converts others into cops by locking fenders, and Capture the Gold, the automotive version of the classic team-based concept "capture the flag."

These fast-paced multiplayer matches are both engrossing and addictive, showcasing—once again—the basic joy of screaming expletives into a headset on Xbox Live.
Che Chou

Offline Versus Online

Judged on its offline merits alone, *Midtown Madness 3*'s repetitive mission goals lack long-term seduction; combined with its potpourri of online features, however, the game is hours of genuine fun—even if it's of the decidedly mind-numbing variety.

ProTip: If your car starts talking to you like KITT from the delightfully zany TV adventure *Knight Rider*, you may, in fact, be David Hasselhoff—and quite popular in Germany.

Seven out of Ten

BIG MUTHA TRUCKERS

Dev: Eutechnyx Pub: Empire Interactive Players: 1 Truckers: Suckers Origin: England Online: No

Making fun of rednecks seems so mid-'90s. So what's to be made of Big Mutha Truckers, a game entirely founded upon the notion that redneck truck drivers are stupid, lazy hicks?

If you're a gamer, the answer is simple. Unless you have some sort of grotesque, masochistic desire to experience one of the most unenjoyable Xbox games to date, you avoid Big Mutha Truckers.

But if you're a game reviewer, the answer is infinitely more painful and involves a neverending slew of the same Grand Theft Auto III-inspired radio jokes, insulting cut-scenes, insipid dialogue, and repetitive gameplay.

The setup for Big Mutha involves an obese gun-toting momma who challenges her three sons and busty daughter—players choose one of the four characters—to generate the most cash in 60 days. To do this, you get behind the wheel of a tractor-trailer, buy goods at low prices in one city, and then haul ass to another city to try to sell those goods at much higher prices.

Along the way, other derogatory redneck archetypes will challenge you

■ Ah, recessive genes and the open road—a winning combination any way you look at it.

to big-money races from city to city, and you'll occasionally be offered "special" missions, like wrecking 15 cars in one minute. Yee. Haw.

What's unfortunate is that if Big Mutha was a straight ahead truck-racing game, the experience wouldn't be half bad: No matter how you cut it, driving an 18-wheeler is pretty fun. But it's not, so it's not.

There's not a lot to Big Mutha Truckers, and what exists is forgettable.
George Jones

Three out of Ten

BLOODY ROAR EXTREME

Dev: Eighting Pub: Konami Players: 1-2 Blood: Simple Origin: Japan Online: No

As with most products of mass entertainment, the fighting game genre is divided into tiers of excellence. The pinnacle for Xbox right now is occupied by Dead or Alive 3 and the as-yet unreleased Soul Calibur 2, while lesser titles such as Kakuto Chojin and Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus occupy the lower end of the chop-socky spectrum. Somewhere in the middle Bloody Roar Extreme, a visually stunning fighting title offers little to the imagination, but somehow ekes out its own sense of rhythm and style.

Roar weds a crude, graceless fighting mechanic to a truly random and bizarre collection of character and background designs. Players pick from a roster of seemingly normal, if not overly dramatized, anime-style characters with the knowledge that these puny humans can, with the tap of a button, morph into ferocious lions, tigers, cheetahs, elephants, dung beetles, and um…rabbits and penguins. If the selection of werefighters here seems haphazard in its conception, well, that's because it is. In fact, the whole game, right down to its mash-

■ Neither Yugo and Shina were able to find Shina's contact lenses. Sadness ensued.

friendly, 10-string hit combos seems straight out of a video kung fu master's worst nightmare.

There's very little rhyme or reason to any of the proceedings, but Roar is still kind of fun. It's the type of fun one gets from watching a B-movie; get past the bad-to-good ratio, and there's a wacky strain of humor underneath all the gaudy characters and piercing Yngwie Malmsteen-style guitar solos. Heed this roar: Rent, do not own.
**Che Chou**

Five out of Ten

FREAKY FLYERS

Dev: Midway Pub: Midway Players: 1-2 Losers: Aloft Origin: Chicago, IL Online: No

Assume somebody lost the licensing rights to Chuck Norris and the Karate Commandos and resorted to a cartoon cast of clichés. Fate conspired further when focus groups showed Pogs no longer assured sales, forcing said somebody to put his characters in planes rather than on paper coins. In other words, assume the plane-based racer Freaky Flyers is the disastrous result of noble intentions.

Sure, Flyers' cast of skyfaring stereotypes includes rats in sombreros and Engrish-speaking ace Sammy Wasabi. So what if, as far as kart races go, streaking through the sky isn't as fun as careening around corners? Soulless premise aside, with some fine-tuning, this could've at least been fun. And, for the first four or so stages, it sort of is. The controls are simple and precise, the wide-open levels let you plot several courses, and the whimsical music—well, just forget about the soundtrack. Embarrassing show tunes notwithstanding, it's the game's artificial difficulty that puts this bird in a nose-dive a third of the way through.

The A.I. pilots are always faster, and
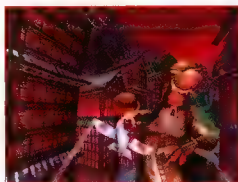
■ Meet Godzilla's seldom-seen cousin Mortzilla. He's a black sheep for appearing in this game.

no amount of ace aerobatics can put you in the lead. The only way to win—provided someone doesn't guarantee a loss by ramming a rocket up your plane's ass—is to retry each lousy race until you've accessed every last short-cut and hidden crutch available to compensate for your speed handicap. Try setting that to lyrics about thumb sucking and you'll see why no self-respecting pilot would put Flyers on his or her flight plan.
Shawn Elliott

Four out of Ten

EVIL DEAD: FISTFUL OF BOOMSTICK

Dev: Vis Interactive Pub: THQ Players: 1 Ash: Wipe Origin: Scotland Online: No

This is a fistful of something, all right. And it's not to be stepped in, taken internally, or flung at humans.

Comic hero Ash once again gets the short end of the boomstick with THQ's punishingly weak Evil Dead game. Evil Dead. Fistful of Boomstick offers naught but endless fetch quests, simple combat, wave after wave of respawning enemies, illogic out the wazoo, and nonsensical puzzles. Despite wielding a chainsaw, a shotgun, and carrying sticks of dynamite, Ash cannot cut or shoot his way through locks, nor can he simply explode locked doors. What Ash can, and will, do is wander aimlessly through bland gray environments, none of which features a newfangled piece of technology known as a "map."

Enemies are plentiful. Ammunition and health packs are scarcer than green kittens. Simply, Ash cannot hope to survive combat for very long, which is depressing, considering the emphasis this game puts on fighting. Multiple Deadite foes flank and tear Ash to pieces in seconds, so players are reduced to playing an endless game of

■ For those keeping score: THQ's record for Evil Dead games is now zero wins, two losses.

run-and-gun with 80 percent running, maybe 10 percent gunning, and 10 percent asking God why he does bad things to good people.

Long after players tire of collecting keys to unlock doors and hoarding silver to close magic portals, Boomstick keeps Ash running back and forth like a post-apocalyptic errand boy. It's entirely no fun, and not even Bruce Campbell's deadly cool comic quips can redeem this sordid mess.
Greg Orlando

Three out of Ten

HULK
Hulk on interpersonal relationships: Hulk smash!
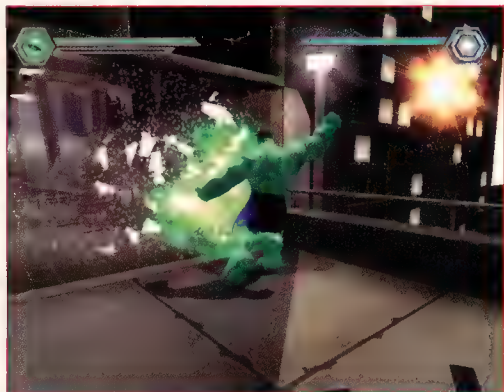
Here, Hulk demonstrate his artistic sense. Few know Hulk studied modern art at University of South Dakota and enjoy expressionism. Also, Hulk not like Hulk pants because Hulk pants are itchy! Hulk smash stupid Hulk pants!

Do the Dew!
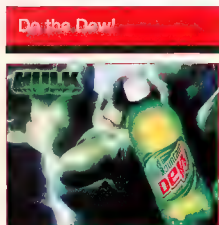
Hulk features numerous product placements, including a baffling cut-scene where Dr. Bruce Banner stares longingly at a can of Mountain Dew. Apparently, no one ever thought it might not be a good idea if Banner (who becomes Hulk when agitated) drank a sugary concoction that acts as a stimulant on the human body.

He's death to purple pants but a genuine hero for the product-placement set, and he's quite likeable when he is angry. He's Marvel Comics' Hulk, and his first Xbox game—pardon the pun—is, at times, smashing good fun.

In this year of our lord 2003, Hulkamania is running wild based on the strength of Ang Lee's big-budget *Hulk* film, which, in turn, begat Vivendi's simple-but-stylish 3D brawler. The game drops players into the role of a verdant behemoth, super strong and super resilient, as he smashes stuff, beats enemies insensate, and snarls a lot. The game also features select scenes where players must guide Hulk's fragile alter ego Bruce Banner through perilous situations, employing stealth and eschewing brawn.

In a destructible world, the Hulk is king. Many objects in the game's environments can be shattered, picked up, used as a weapon, slammed down on foes, or hurled with great force. It's understood that the comic book Hulk could destroy a skyscraper without too much effort, and the videogame Hulk must necessarily be weakened for the sake of gameplay. Still, the game gives players just enough stuff to tear down and smash up to make them forget they're controlling a decidedly underpowered jade giant.

Sort-of cel shading effects make
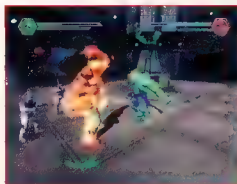
Hulk oftentime wonder if violence is solution to life's problems, like flaming enemies who want to smash Hulk.

Hulk stand out among his videogame brethren. The Hulk is rendered with vibrant hues and his incredible bulk is emphasized with superlative shading, putting to shame the graphics of nearly any superhero game to come before it.

The smashmouth brawling presented here is absolutely fine. Players will find themselves pitted against gun toting and rocket launcher-carrying humans, giant machine guns, twisted canines, gamma radiation-fueled creeps, and bosses straight from the *Hulk* comics and the game does an excellent job of keeping the tension high with plenty of on-screen baddies to pummel. The green goliath can employ more than 40-plus offensive moves and throws, including hand-

Kids! Write your own Hulk caption. Hint: anything in Hulk-speak is inherently funny.

clap sonic booms, flying attacks, and painfully destructive slams and backbreakers. Thankfully, gameplay does not demand that the Hulk kill all enemies in a given area before moving on and by giving players the option to fight or flee, *Hulk* manages to avoid the tedium of the more rote beat-'em-ups.

Unfortunately, Bruce Banner's sober yin can't wash the dirty, gamma-irradiated socks of the Hulk's raging yang. As Banner, players must eschew fighting and instead skulk about in an attempt to dodge foes, which isn't altogether difficult because most in-game enemies display the intelligence

The game does an excellent job of keeping the tension high with **plenty of on-screen baddies to pummel.**
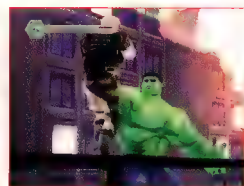
■ Hulk like to sing show tunes when no one is looking. "Where is love?" Hulk ask. "Does it fall from skies above? Is it underneath the willow tree that Hulk's been dreaming of?"

of, say, tree bark. Guards will actually forget about chasing Banner once he's turned a corner or ducked behind a barricade. There's even a nonsensical scene requiring Banner to sneak around while wearing a guard's uniform complete with face-obscuring mask; during this portion of play, enemies magically (and inexplicably) gain the ability to pierce this disguise by simply coming close to Banner. These *Metal Gear*-lite levels, of which there are sufficient quantity to weigh the game down, hold little challenge, serve only to pad out the proceedings unnecessarily, and smack of half-assed game design.
Greg Orlando

Six out of Ten

Puny humans read this!

The Incredible Hulk for beginners....

The Incredible Hulk got his start in *The Incredible Hulk* #1, a comic which both promised (and delivered) "Fantasy as you like it!" In this issue, Hulk was born from gamma radiation, and was initially colored gray. Comic legends Stan "The Man" Lee and "Jolly" Jack Kirby guided Hulk through this initial adventure and the five issues that followed it. Hulk was canceled after six issues, but was to return shortly thereafter, and also played a pivotal role in the formation of superhero teams the Avengers and Defenders.

Throughout his 40-plus years, Hulk has seen his share of epic adventures—and many a stupid one. At times, Hulk was returned to his gray form and became a Las Vegas legbreaker called Mr. Fixit, was split from his alter-ego Bruce Banner, gave birth to the "Sensational" She-Hulk, fought (and we are not making this up) "The Hulkbusters" as well as The Toad Men from outer space, and smashed a lot of stuff. Rock on, Hulkster.

ALIENS VS. PREDATOR: EXTINCTION
...In which Pooh puts down the hunny and starts shooting

In a three-way war among humans, aliens, and predators, there are no losers, save for perhaps the twisted, mangled, bullet-ridden, acid-scarred, impaled, burnt, dismembered, zapped from space, nuked, or otherwise gruesomely divested of their sad video lives corpses of said species.

Aliens vs. Predator: Extinction fuses movie-license-based carnage with real-time simulation and emerges as one of Xbox's most curious titles to date. All three sides are playable here, and there's a lot to like within each. Aliens are fast and nasty; they can incapacitate foes, drag them to the hive, and impregnate the comatose bodies to create all sorts of powerful warriors. Predators employ cloaking technology, rip skulls from their dead enemies, and use them as currency, while the clever humans make better killing through technology. All the races can improve their lot in life via upgrades allowing for more powerful units, devastating attacks, and the like. Both upgrades and reinforcements are bought by earning credits (humans), collecting skulls (predators), and killing and impregnating hosts (aliens); it's a rather absurd system, one that supposes human troops have to be purchased before they can make a landing and aliens have to use infestation points to alter the species.

Mission-based play challenges arm-

■ ProTip: When being attacked by a predator, try to avoid asking it if it's really just bad actor Jean-Claude Van Damme in a rubber suit.

Battle in Progress!

■ In case anyone missed the part where the space marines are shooting and attempting to flash-fry the alien queen, *Aliens vs. Predator: Extinction* thoughtfully reminds all a battle is, in fact, in progress

The game **sinks in the perilous minefield that is RTS convention** and its *de rigueur* level design

chair generals with exploration and mass destruction. The game tasks each race with seven different scenarios for a total of 21 missions. Strict time deadlines are imposed on players, so the urge to let troops sit, rest, and recoup energy is neatly put into check.

This adds a good deal of tension to the proceedings and is certainly a welcome addition.

Extinction's controls work well on Xbox, with players quickly able to select squads and move them around. It's also possible to assign way points to help troops navigate, and individual groups can be mapped to the Xbox controller's D-pad to ensure easy switching back and forth between them.

Sadly, the game sinks in the perilous minefield that is RTS convention and its *de rigueur* level design. In a game where two of three races employ high technology, it seems stupid to employ fog-of-war, but *Extinction* gleefully embraces it. Worse, the game delights in tossing up mountain ranges at every turn; levels become an exercise in finding the one true path between them. And war is hell, kid, especially when the environments become ever cramped and death-dealing troops are unable to get from A to B without first visiting C, D, and E.
Greg Orlando

■ Aliens and predators could not agree on the issue of whether ketchup is a solid or liquid. Millions died. (Fun fact: Ketchup is a thixotropic material. It's thick like a solid, but flows like a liquid.)

Six out of Ten

MACE GRIFFIN: BOUNTY HUNTER

Dev: Warthog
Pub: Vivendi / Universal
Players: 1

SHAM: Tastic
Origin: England
Online: No

In space, no one can hear you scream, "Mace Griffin Bounty Hunter, why don't you hunt down the developers who made your mediocre game?" It's sad to see this long-anticipated title and its oft-mentioned hero stumble over the tiniest of details and then completely trip over the important stuff. Take the game's A.I. for one, whereby enemies are so dumb they often fail to notice Griffin as he approaches. Sometimes, they'll even keep marching forward, totally oblivious, after they've been plugged in the skull and are gushing blood from their craniums.

Then there's the play control. A few tweaks and the setup would have been perfect. As it stands however, movement from left to right is way too slow, which screws up everything. It takes three full seconds to turn 180 degrees, so death is guaranteed in cramped quarters. Movement in space while flying your shuttle presents a similar problem: Strafing left or right in midair is so slow that attempting to do so is pointless. A smaller issue, but still annoying, is the fact that you can't adjust your controls once you've started playing. You have to

■ Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter gets to shoot enemies with television heads. This is perhaps the coolest gameplay feature ever.
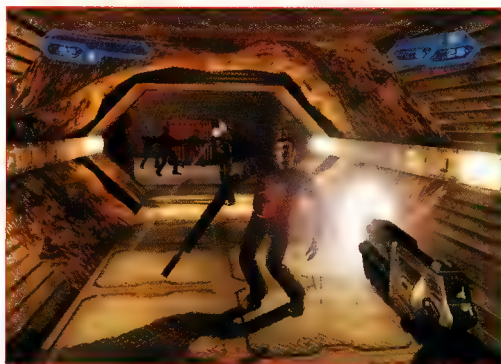
wait until you get to a checkpoint, cancel out of the game, and then fiddle with the setup from the initial option screen.

Had these wrinkles been ironed out, Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter may have been worth playing. The graphics are solid, the level designs are clever, and the ability to shift from FPS action to aerial combat on the fly is truly inventive. With the flaws intact, sadly, this game is average at best.
Ethan Einhorn

Five out of Ten

SPEED KINGS 2

Dev: Climax
Pub: Acclaim
Players: 1-2

Kings: Of Crash
Origin: England
Online: No

For those who are, shall we say, less than sane, fewer things get the adrenaline flowing better than going really fast on a motorcycle. You know, those things without the handy reinforced steel safety cages. Or doors. The titular Speed Kings are such people, and though they're never introduced by name, there's still a sense of loss when they leave this mortal coil. Which happens roughly 163 times per lap.

It's a bad sign when a track bonus is granted if you manage to finish a single lap without crashing. You almost believe you're racing against competent A.I.—that is, until you watch as they introduce themselves to the tail end of a Mazda. Before you can eke out a "glad that's not me" chuckle, you yourself slam into a car that, for whatever reason, decided to park in the middle of a freeway. Don't misinterpret: Narrowly evading the oncoming grill of a flatbed truck can be, at times, thrilling, as it should be when talking about racing motorcycles. But it's the combination of location, timing, and sheer frequency of the crashes that

■ The crashtastic and the wrecktacular Speed Kings 2 has caused a 10-car pileup within the chambers of our hearts.

borders on absurd. The consolation is that you can still get first place, as the A.I. drivers are also not immune to rush-hour traffic.

Everything else here is merely pleasant, and Speed Kings, while it lasts, is a passable motorcycle racer with decent track design, a solid framerate and a healthy sense of speed. But it's hard to recommend when it coexists with the superior-in-every-way MotoGP 2.
Andrew Pfister

Five out of Ten

TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON: ISLAND THUNDER

Dev: Red Storm
Pub: Ubi Soft
Players: 1-16

Viva: La Cuba
Origin: Morrisville, NC
Online: Yes
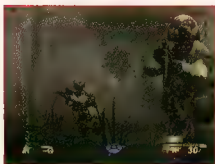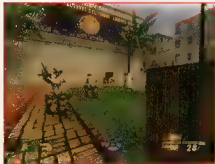
■ It's a proven fact: wearing camouflage in the jungle makes one very hard to see.

Reviewing *Ghost Recon: Island Thunder*, Red Storm's latest add-on pack for its dominant tactical shooter series, requires one to examine the context surrounding its release. Though it only has eight single-player missions in its campaign, *Thunder* retails for $29 (with a $10 rebate). The other, less-proven factors evening out *Thunder*'s short playtime are the forthcoming maps and missions that will be trickling onto Xbox Live.

In *Thunder*, players hit the steamy Cuban jungles to "equalize" the first public election since the death of Fidel Castro. Mission goals vary from gunning down AK-47-toting guerrillas, to sneaking up on said guerrillas and methodically gunning them down. What these scenarios lack in creative inspiration, they more than make up for in strategy and gameplay design. Many of these eight new levels give players an unprecedented number of tactical opportunities, allowing would-be squad leaders to really take advantage of both Alpha and Bravo teams in action

Like its full-length predecessor, *Thunder*'s true colors can only be

experienced on Xbox Live, with or against 15 other faceless pups eager to shoot first and ask questions later. *Thunder* is a blast online, whether it's co-op, team deathmatch, or every man for himself. The addition of a global-ranking system and scoreboard helps give this game the community it's des-

perately lacked since its initial release. At $29, *Thunder* is worth picking up for veterans and initiates alike.
Che Chou

Seven out of Ten

THE ITALIAN JOB

Dev: Climax
Pub: Eidos
Players : 1-2

Get in: Get out
Origin: England
Online: No

■ It's not the size of the Cooper, it's the motion of the notion that this is one cool-ass car to drive. Or something like that.

Although it's a licensed game, *The Italian Job* is barely related to the eponymous film. The film's actors do not lend their voices. No clips of the flick appear in the game. What *Job* does share with its cinematic sibling is product placement. No need to wait for *Mini Cooper Racing*—this is it.

Thanks to tight control, the Mini fairly dances through this re-creation of Los Angeles, which teems with a zillion shortcuts and convincing (and thankfully nonrepetitive) traffic patterns. But otherwise, *Job* is unremarkable, and can often be downright irritating. Why, why is there no map? Every mission in Story mode has you driving to a certain spot within a time limit. Sometimes, the goal isn't visible from the street, and sometimes it's not even on street level. With no map to guide you, these missions are as much fun as trying to solve a Rubik's Cube in the dark. Furthermore, although each mission has multiple unrelated parts, you must finish all parts at once or do them all over. A dozen wearying iterations of the same level will wear out any

gamer's clutch.

The Circuit Racing mode is standard stuff: three laps, go fast, look for shortcuts. *Job*'s Stunt Driving mode, on the other hand, is like a quirky puzzle game. It's fun to maneuver a Mini through an obstacle course of ramps, tunnels, jumps, and tight turns, but

that's hardly the visceral driving experience *Job* led us to expect. For that, look to *Midnight Club II* or *Burnout 2*.
Paul V. Byrnes

Four out of Ten

FINDING NEMO

Dev: Traveler's Tales Pub: THQ Players: 1 Sea: Worthy Origin: England Xbox Live: No

With all the wholesome feel-goodness and eye-popping visuals of the Disney movie, *Finding Nemo* is surprisingly fun. Yeah, it's filled with stupid, button-mashing races and annoying slider puzzles, but there are some clever mazes and problem-solving challenges as well.

The 3D adventure follows the hand-wringing story of the young clownfish Nemo, who gets collected by a diver, and his dad, who is, of course, trying to find him. Levels are seamlessly connected with cut-scenes that carry the story along, and players are gently eased into mechanics, learning such important skills as guiding the fish to swim through hoops of bubbles (a trick you must perform repeatedly throughout in order to collect all the minigames).

Players control Nemo, his dad Marlin, or the forgetful royal blue tang fish Dory, sometimes using each fish's strengths cooperatively to achieve goals. Typical underwater thrills include spiny foes, electrifying eels, and shark chases. Gameplay is formulaic and a bit uneven, sometimes challenging and

■ Once you find Nemo, we strongly urge you to put that damn (darn?) kid on a leash!

sometimes laughably easy: One level late in the game takes one minute and 40 seconds to beat on the first try. That said, while the game is short, it's fun to go back and try to beat your playtime for each level and collect all the items.

Finding Nemo will probably make the hardcore puke, but it's not designed for them—it's a kids' game. Adults who can't normally beat a typical platformer may even get into it too. The rest of you have other fish to fry.
Carrie Shepherd

Six out of Ten

FIREBLADE

Dev: Kuju Entertainment Pub: Midway Players: 1 Slice?: No Dice Origin: England Online: No

Fireblade tells a throwaway story about a group of terrorists called the United Eastern States, who are creating weapons of mass destruction and the antiterrorist unit that must stop them. Politically incorrect storyline aside, the game does feature its share of action. Players control one of two helicopters, both of which handle roughly the same way—despite one being a transport chopper and one being a combat vehicle. That is to say, neither handles very well at all.

The main problems with *Fireblade* are its boring weapon loadout and repetitive "kill everything" challenges. For 90 percent of the game, players are armed with a chaingun, dumbfire rockets, an EMP cannon, and homing missiles. There's also a sniper rifle, Stealth mode, thermal imaging, swarming missiles, and a rail driver, but these come up so infrequently that they might as well not be included. Missions are an uneven lot, quality-wise, and range from the moderately creative—covering a special ops team while they plant explosives on a dam—to the completely ripped off, like shooting a

■ The most boring screen shot ever deserves an equally boring caption. Go banana!

projectile up an exhaust port...er, sorry, ventilation shaft.

Though the game plays well, it never transcends tired videogame clichés. Enemy units resemble toys, your flight trainer instructs you to "pick up power-ups," and a commanding officer offers sage advice like, "If it moves, shoot it." Midway has included a five-minute documentary on attack helicopters, but there are half-hour options available for free on The Learning Channel.
Doug Trueman

Six out of Ten

FREESTYLE METAL X

Dev: Deibus Studios Pub: Midway Players: 1 Moto: Guzzi Origin: England Online: No

Freestyle Metal X is many good ideas tied together by a very bad one. Its creators nicked every successful concept from the extreme sports map: the level structure from *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*, the trick system from *Dave Mirra Freestyle BMX*, and level goals from every game available, which, practically speaking, wasn't such a bad way to go about things. They then decided to cobble those ideas into a motocross game, with little consideration for the myriad ways in which a 250cc motorcycle differs from a skateboard. That's why this game fails, despite the exalted presence of Motörhead on the soundtrack.

A skateboard is slow, small, and nimble. A motorcycle is fast, heavy, and difficult to maneuver. Throwing the latter into levels and game systems designed for the former results in a curious mix of issues. Goals are alternately too easy because the bike's brute speed makes gaps and jumps so simple, or too hard because twitchy steering and excess velocity make delicate maneuvering impossible.

As the game goes on, the holes in
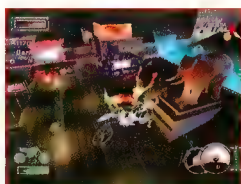
■ Despite the presence of rock gods Motörhead, X marks the spot for mediocrity.

its design just get bigger and bigger. The goals never seem properly tuned, and there are ugly flaws in the level designs. Some even trap you in spots where you can't build enough speed to escape. The potential for a good game was here at some point—Deibus built a fine graphics engine, and the controls are solid when viewed independently of the level designs. But the search for a decent freestyle MX game will have to continue.
David Smith

Four out of Ten

FURIOUS KARTING

Dev: Babylon Pub: Atari Players: 1 - 4 Origin: France Kurious: Farting Online: No

Carpet bombing? Mass beheadings? They pale in comparison to the overwhelming fury of karting. (Nothing, and we mean nothing, says furiousness and naked aggression like karting.) With Atari's *Furious Karting*, players can take out their hatred and frustration on cartoonish drivers, jamming in front of them at inappropriate times and then, for the *coup de grace*, the apex of unrestrained hostility, making an apologetic gesture to ensure there's no hard feelings.

Karting seems to have been birthed on a kinder, gentler planet, where people give a damn about their fellow man. Inexplicably, it features a "karma" system that influences the way opposing drivers respond to the player's aggressive driving. The higher the player's karma rating, the more likely the A.I. racers will tolerate being, say, jammed into a wall. It's a ridiculous system, and players can actually pacify their competition into a semi-stupor by behaving poorly on the track and then employing the Xbox controller's "X" button to apologize for it.

As for the rest, well, it's competently
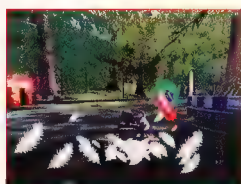
■ *Furious Karting* gets the award for the most furiously named Xbox title to date.

rendered, with interesting tracks, a nice trick system in which players are rewarded for riding on two wheels, and a solid multiplayer mode. The controls here are highly responsive and well-tuned; players will find themselves able to perform with skill. A Scenario mode provides enough challenge to kill a whole weekend, and drivers can opt to play one of two distinct clans, each with its own furiously branching storyline.
Greg Orlando

Five out of Ten

MLB SLUGFEST 20-04

■ It's baseball with speed trails, turbo boosts, annoying announcers, and cheerleaders. Color us disinterested.

If, in fact, U.S. general Abner Doubleday created baseball, he's surely regretting it now. Midway's stab at the sport features more flash than a Fourth of July pyrotechnics display: sexy cheerleaders; players who catch fire; turbo-fueled hits and pitches; fluorescent ball trails; over-the-top animations; and exactly zero-percent substance. It's baseball done for the mindless MTV generation, and it smells like a turd polished to a high gloss.

Tim Kitzrow and Kevin Matthews provide the most grating commentary ever sported in any videogame real or imagined. Matthews as color man "Jimmy Shorts" sounds like Elmer Fudd without the speech impediment and simply does not shut up, continually spouting such dreck as, "You know when you hit something that hard, it doesn't matter what it is, it just feels good." *Slugfest 20-04* is best savored with the volume at zero. Or less.

Get past the dialogue, and you can expect baseball that's so gimmicky it's almost unplayable. Runners can be thrown out at first base by centerfielders using turbo-powered throws. Batters

can be wasted with super pitches that float in the air and rocket down into the catcher's glove. Fielders can have balls knocked from their gloves by an opposing player's stiff arms. The game has some limited appeal, but only if you're terminally stupid and yearn for the opportunity to play baseball as a team

of horses who use spiked-club bats and compete against a squad of hydrocephalic little-leaguers.
Greg Orlando

Four out of Ten

NCAA FOOTBALL 2004

■ Johnny "Two Hands" Simpson meets his arch-enemy Frank "Dos Manos" Wilkerson. A football caption ensued.

Sure, you can jump right into *NCAA Football 2004* and take the reigns of your favorite institute of higher learning for a game, season, eternity. You can even relive one of the 20 greatest games in NCAA history. But what's the fun in replaying history when it can be created from scratch?

Unless you're a tried-and-true fan of college football, the secret to unlocking *NCAA Football 2004* lies in the game's Create-a-School feature combined with its Dynasty mode. Between the two, you can create your own four-year university, and enter it into an NCAA Division I league with the goal of winning the league and NCAA titles, or at least getting on TV a few times to boost the school's reputation and help land a few blue-chip high-school recruits.

Dynasty mode allows you to enjoy one of the best college football games ever created in a setting that, at times, feels like an adventure or role-playing game. The day you watch that formerly gawky freshman fifth-string wide receiver crack the starting lineup and catch two touchdowns in his first game as a senior, you'll understand.

With a vivid, colorful style conjuring up the pageantry of the college game, *NCAA 2004* is second only to EA Sports' top-notch *Madden* franchise in looks, features, and control. The lack of online play is unfortunate, however, and neither Xbox controller was designed with football in mind: reaching the black

and white buttons required to run the option requires superhuman dexterity. But hey, who said football doesn't hurt?
George Jones

Eight out of Ten
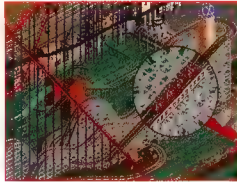
ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON
Dev: Chris Sawyer Pub: Infogrames Players: 1 Roller: I hardly knew her! Origin: Scotland Online: No

For better or worse, Infogrames' recently released *Rollercoaster Tycoon* for Xbox is a direct port of the PC title from 1999.

The good news is that fans of the series are going to get all they want and a bit more, as the Xbox version also includes the two expansions, *Loopy Landscapes* and *Corkscrew Follies*. The bad news is that the title has not been improved or enhanced in any way, and only adds more fuel to the "Xbox is simply a mini PC and will be a haven for mediocre PC ports" argument—just when you thought that one had died like the dodo.

As the name suggests (and the *Tycoon* series is famous for), would-be billionaires are thrust into the middle of a giant undertaking in the form of owning and maintaining their own theme parks. From pre-made landscapes to those cobbled from scratch, it's up to the player to reach down into his deepest Disney instincts and create fun for the whole family while attempting to rake in as much cash as humanly possible.

Players can start small and graduate

■ The Vominator promises far-flung thrills with 20 percent more mopping after the fact.

to huge parks by designing vast arenas filled with roller coasters, merry-go-rounds, and food outlets. Those with a sadistic streak can even sabotage said rides and watch their patrons go sailing right out there, should they so desire.

Above all, *Rollercoaster Tycoon* is a mediocre-looking strategy game with amazing depth and gameplay value—a decent enough ride to be sure, and maybe even worth the \$30 price of admission.
Russell Garbutt

Six out of Ten

INDYCAR SERIES
Dev: Brain in a Jar Pub: Codemasters Players: 1-2 Indy: Call him Dr. Jones! Origin: England Online: No

When you make a game based on a racing series in which 200 mph is considered slow, you know you've got to get that sense of speed right. Luckily, *IndyCar Series* feels so fast, you may need to install seatbelts on your ottoman.

At first, it feels like that's all the developers got right. Playing *Series'* most basic difficulty levels yields a shallow, simple game you can complete in a couple hours. Seriously, how engaging can driving in circles be, no matter how fast you're going?

But turning up the difficulty level on this game reveals one of the most full-featured racing simulators this side of the PC. Armchair drivers will need to learn not only how to adjust spring rates, tire pressures, and wing angles, but also exactly how said adjustments will affect the handling of the car, the drag, and even the tire temperatures. It's challenging, it's fun, and shaving seconds off that lap time is unbelievably satisfying. A word to the wise, though: If you're not a hardcore race fan, you'll get frustrated pretty quickly here.

If *Series* has any glaring issues,

■ Here in my car/it doesn't go far/because I just had a crash/with cars

they're with its graphics and sound. The game looks washed out, the crowds pop in and out of view as you run through each course, and everything is just generally jagged and chunky-looking. And you'll want to turn off the annoying soundtrack almost immediately. It's hard to hear your spotter with it on anyway.

Still, if you value great gameplay and major challenge over eye candy, *Series* may be the racer you're looking for.
Greg Sewart

Seven out of Ten

RENT-A-HERO NO. 1
Dev: Sega Pub: AIA USA Players: 1 Rent: Don't Buy Origin: Japan Online: No

Sega's driven the Wayback machine to So Five Minutes Ago to pluck the Dreamcast adventure *Rent-a-Hero No. 1* from obscurity and port it over—unchanged—to Xbox. In the business world, this is known as "a bad decision."

Quirky and eminently lovable, *Hero* tells the story of a young boy given a super suit by a mad scientist. As a Rent-a-Hero, players must perform good deeds in order to pay the upkeep fee on the suit and also buy such things as batteries to power it. Missions include simple pummeling exercises, advertising-flier distribution, food-delivery challenges, and rescue operations. Later, Hero confronts many, many bad guys and other Rent-a-Heroes who serve as competition.

Insanity seems to have prevailed here. Rest assured, there is not enough lunacy in the entire world (including New Jersey) to warrant the creation of *Rent-A-Hero No. 2*. Although *Hero's* high concept borders on the brilliant, the game itself is poorly executed and seems as out of place on Xbox as a rump roast at a vegan restaurant. The

■ Tonight at 10: Schmuck in power suit kicks idiot with mohawk's ass. Stay tuned!

game's graphics are dated even for a Dreamcast game. At times, the "missions" involve the most dreary back-and-forth schlepping to find items or people. *Hero* also offers no analog control, forcing players to navigate clumsily via the Xbox controller's D-pad. The in-game text, meant to be zany, has been inelegantly translated so it now appears to have been written entirely by squid, or perhaps a disinterested parrot
Greg Orlando

Four out of Ten

STAKE
Dev: Gameness Art Pub: Metro 3D Players: 1-4 Stake: Bloody Origin: Taiwan Online: No

Once in a while, a title comes along that's so downright miserable, it makes one wonder how the game company that put it out it stays in business. Metro 3D will soon cause many to scratch their heads as the *Power Stone*-esque brawler *Stake* hits store shelves with a \$30 price tag. There are about as many reasons not to buy this game as there are dollars in the product's price, and Metro 3D should do its civic duty and warn potential buyers by simply renaming the game *Super Ass Brothers Melee*.

The single-player campaign seems tacked on, and *Stake* does nothing to differentiate its two modes of play. The multiplayer mode can sport up to three computer-controlled opponents, whose jerky A.I. makes them both difficult to locate and laughably haphazard in combat.

Fun will remain elusive as players pick a character from a pool of eight vaguely SNK or Capcom-like characters and muddle through a confusing map system, unresponsive controls, and a pathetic two-attack combat system. There isn't even any eye candy

■ *Stake* It's what's for dinner. But only if you're hungry enough to eat a crap videogame.

to help Tylenol you from the headache earned by playing this rotten apple, as the graphics and animation are bland, and repetitive, the sound effects few and muffled, and the blaring, obnoxious music overpowers everything like a bad trumpet solo performed right in front of your face.

Metro3D should invest in one more stake, but it should be of the wooden variety and plunged directly into the heart of this monstrosity.
Russell Garbutt

Two out of Ten

REWIND

Go forward to the past with *Xbox Nation*'s previous reviews

Top eight games from *Xbox Nation* 008, because 10 didn't really fit

Burnout 2: Point of Impact
Dev: Criterion Games
Pub: Acclaim
In terms of pure adrenaline and graphical splendor, there isn't a racer out there that can stack up against *Burnout 2*.
XBN Rating: 9

NBA Street Vol. 2
Dev: EA Vancouver
Pub: Electronic Arts
NBA Street Vol. 2 successfully fuses realistic physics and movements with decidedly unrealistic feats of fancy.
XBN Rating: 9

MotoGP 2
Dev: Climax
Pub: THQ
Featuring updated riders, real bikes, all 16 tracks from the official MotoGP season, and all-around slicker graphics.
XBN Rating: 8

Phantasy Star Online
Dev: Sonic Team
Pub: Sega
Though slightly flawed, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more gratifying online solution than *Phantasy Star Online*.
XBN Rating: 7

Return to Castle Wolfenstein
Dev: id/Nerve Software
Pub: Activision
It flirts with greatness, but doesn't reach the bar established by *Halo*. Still its multiplayer is on par with the best on Xbox.
XBN Rating: 8

The Sims
Dev: Maxis/Edge
Pub: EA Games
The Sims lacks the downloadable content of its PC brother, but adds twice the gameplay with a level-based mode.
XBN Rating: 8

Pro Race Driver
Dev: Codemasters
Pub: Codemasters
Tight driving feel, responsive controls, and enough vehicle-tuning options for gearheads, yet easy for Sunday drivers.
XBN Rating: 7

Star Wars: The Clone Wars
Dev: LucasArts
Pub: Pandemic
Though lacking in originality in single-player mode, *The Clone Wars* screams to be played with others online.
XBN Rating: 6

And the rest. . .

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
All-Star Baseball	Acclaim	Acclaim	3
Amped: Snowboarding	Microsoft	Microsoft	6
Apex	Milestone	Atari	8
Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance	Snowblind	Interplay	7
Batman: Dark Tomorrow	Kemco	Kemco	2
Batman: Vengeance	Ubi Soft Montreal	Ubi Soft	5
Battle Engine Aquila	Lost Toys	Infogrames	7
Black Stone: Magic and Steel	Xpec Inc.	Xicat	3
Blade II	Mucky Foot	Activision	4
Blinx: The Time Sweeper	Artoon	Microsoft	6
Blood Omen II	Crystal Dynamics	Eidos	7
BloodRayne	Terminal Reality	Majesco	6
BMX XXX	Z-Axis	Acclaim	4
Bruce Lee: Quest of the Dragon	Ronin	Universal Interactive	2
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	The Collective	Electronic Arts	8

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
Burnout	Criterion	Acclaim	7
Capcom vs. SNK: EO	Capcom	Capcom	8
Chase: Hollywood Stunt Driver	I-Imagine	Bam!	6
Circus Maximus: Chariot Wars	Kodiak	Encore	5
Colin McRae Rally 3	Codemasters	Codemasters	8
Commandos 2: Men of Courage	Pyro	Eidos	7
Conflict: Desert Storm	SCI Games/Pivotal	Gotham Games	5
Crash Bandicoot	Traveller's Tales	Universal Interactive	6
Crazy Taxi 3: High Roller	Sega	Acclaim	6
Dark Angel	Radical Ent.	Sierra/Fox Interactive	2
Dave Mirra 2	Z-Axis	Acclaim	5
Dead or Alive 3	Team Ninja	Tecmo	7
Dead to Rights	Namco	Namco	4
Deathrow	Southend	Ubi Soft	6
Defender	Seven Studios	Midway	5

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
Dr. Muto	Midway	Midway	4
DOA: Xtreme Beach Volleyball	Team Ninja	Tecmo	7
Dragon's Lair 3D: Return to the Lair	DragonStone	Ubi Soft	7
Dynasty Warriors 3	Koei	Koei	8
Eggmania: Eggstreme Madness	Hot Gen Studios Ltd.	Kemco	5
Elder Scrolls 3: Morrowind	Bethesda Softworks	Bethesda Softworks	8
Enclave	Starbreeze Studios	Conspiracy Games	5
ESPN NBA 2Night	Konami	Konami	5
ESPN NFL Prime Time	Konami	Konami	3
ESPN Winter X Games Snowboarding 2002	Konami	Konami	4
Fatal Frame	Tecmo	Tecmo	6
FIFA Soccer 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	8
Frogger Beyond	Konami	Konami	4
Fuzion Frenzy	Blitz Games	Microsoft	6
Genma Onimusha	Capcom	Capcom	7
Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee	Pipeworks	Atari	4
GunValkyrie	Smilebit	Sega	6
Halo	Bungie	Microsoft	10
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	Eurocom/EA UK	EA Games	7
High Heat MLB 2004	3DO	3DO	8
Hitman 2: Silent Assassin	Io Interactive	Eidos	8
House of the Dead III	Wow	Sega	7
Hunter: The Reckoning	Digital Mayhem	Interplay	8
Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb	The Collective	LucasArts	7
Inside Pitch 2003	MS Game Studios	Microsoft	3
James Bond: NightFire	Eurocom	EA Games	8
Jedi Knight 2	Raven	LucasArts	7
Jedi Starfighter	Secret Level	LucasArts	7
Jet Set Radio Future	Smilebit	Sega	8
Jurassic Park: Operation Genesis	Universal	Vivendi	6
Kakuto Chojin	Dream Factory	Microsoft	3
Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer	Treyarch	Activision	5
Kung Fu Chaos	Just Add Monsters	Microsoft	5
Legends of Wrestling	Acclaim	Acclaim	6
Legends of Wrestling II	Acclaim	Acclaim	4
Loons: The Fight for Fame	Warthog	Infogrames	3
Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring	WXP	Universal	2
Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	EA/Stormfront	EA	8
Madden NFL 2003	Tiburon	EA Sports	9
Marvel vs. Capcom 2	Capcom	Capcom	3
Matt Hoffman's Pro BMX 2	Rainbow Studios	Activision	7
Max Payne	Remedy Ent. Neo	Rockstar	8
MechAssault	Day 1 Studios	Microsoft	7
Medal of Honor: Frontline	Dreamworks Int.	EA Games	7
Metal Dungeon	Panther	Xicat Interactive	4
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance	Konami	Konami	9
Mike Tyson Heavyweight Boxing	Atomic Planet	Codemasters	4
Minority Report	Treyarch	Activision	5
MLB Slugfest 20-03	Midway	Midway	5
Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance	Midway	Midway	6
Motor Trend Lotus Challenge	Kuju	Xicat	3
Moto GP	Climax	THQ	8
Murakumo	From Software	Ubi Soft	5
MVP Baseball 2003	EA Canada	EA Sports	7
MX Superfly	Pacific Coast	THQ	4
Myst III: Exile	Presto Studios	Ubi Soft	4
NASCAR Heat	MGI	Infogrames	5
NBA 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega Sports	8
NBA Inside Drive 2003	High Voltage	Microsoft	6
NBA Live 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	7
NBA Starting Five	Konami	Konami	5
NCAA 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega	7
NCAA College Basketball 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega Sports	7
NCAA Football 2003	EA Sports	Electronic Arts	8
Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2	EA Studios	Electronic Arts	7
NFL 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega	9
NFL Blitz 20-03	Midway	Midway	6
NFL Fever 2003	MS Game Studios	Microsoft	8
NHL 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	7
NHL Hitz 20-03	Midway	Midway	7

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
Nickelodeon Party Blast	Data Design	Infogrames	2
Nightcaster II: Equinox	Jaleco	Jaleco	5
Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee	Oddworld Inhabitants	Microsoft	8
Outlaw Golf	Hypnotix	Simon & Schuster	7
Pac-Man World 2	Namco	Namco	5
Panzer Dragoon Orta	Smilebit	Sega	9
Phantom Crash	Genki	Phantagram Interactive	8
Prisoner of War	Wide Games	Codemasters	7
Project Gotham Racing	Bizarre Creations	Microsoft	8
Pulse Racer	Jaleco	Jaleco	2
Quantum Redshift	Curly Monsters	Microsoft	6
Rallisport Challenge	Digital Illusions	Microsoft	8
Rally Fusion	Climax	Activision	6
Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc	Ubi Soft	Ubi Soft	6
Rayman Arena	Ubi Soft	Ubi Soft	5
Red Faction II	Volition	THQ	4
Redcard Soccer 20-03	Midway	Midway	5
Reign of Fire	Kuju	Bam!	4
RoboCop	Titus	Titus	3
Robotech: Battlecry	Vicious Cycle	TDK	6
Rocky	Rage	Ubi Soft	7
Run Like Hell	Digital Mayhem	Interplay	7
Seablade	Vision Scape	Simon & Schuster	2
Sega GT 2002	WOW Entertainment	Sega	8
Sega Soccer Slam	Black Box	Sega Players	2
Serious Sam	Gotham Games	Croteam	5
Shenmue II	Sega/AM2	Microsoft	7
Shrek Super Party	Mass Media	TDK Mediactive	3
Silent Hill 2	Konami	Konami	8
Sneakers	Media Vision	Microsoft	3
Spider-Man	Treyarch	Activision	7
Splashdown	Rainbow Studios	Infogrames	7
SSX Tricky	EA Canada	Electronic Arts	8
Star Wars Obi-Wan	LucasArts	LucasArts	5
Star Wars: Jedi Starfighter	Secret Level	LucasArts	6
State of Emergency	Vis	Rockstart Games	5
Steel Battalion	Capcom	Capcom	10
Street Hoops	Black Ops	Activision	3
Super Bubble Pop	Rune Craft	Jaleco	3
Superman: The Man of Steel	Circus Freak	Atari/Infogrames	4
Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus	Studio Gigante	Microsoft	7
Taz: Wanted	Blitz Games	Infogrames	7
Terminator: Dawn of Fate	Paradigm Ent	Infogrames	2
The Thing	Computer Artworks	Black Label	7
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	8
TimeSplitters 2	Free Radical	Eidos	8
ToeJam & Earl III: Mission to Earth	Visual Concepts	Sega	7
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon	Red Storm	Ubi Soft	8
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell	Ubi Soft Montreal	Ubi Soft	8
THPS2X	Neversoft/Treyarch	Activision 02	6
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4	Neversoft	Activision	7
Total Immersion Racing	Razorworks	Empire Interactive	6
Totaled!	Rage Software	Majesco	4
TransWorld Snowboarding	Housemarque	Infogrames	6
TransWorld Surf	Atari/Angel Studios	Infogrames	3
Turok: Evolution	Acclaim	Acclaim	6
UFC Tapout	Dream Factory	Crave	5
UFC Tapout 2	Dream Factory	TDK Mediactive	5
Unreal Championship	Digital Extremes	Atari	7
Vexx	Acclaim	Acclaim	5
Whacked!	Presto Studios	Microsoft	4
Whiteout	Vicarious Visions	Konami	4
World Racing	Synetic	TDK Mediactive	4
World Series Baseball	Blue Shift/VC	Sega	9
World Series Baseball 2K3	Blue Shift	Sega	9
Wreckless	Bunkasha	Activision	8
WTA World Tour Tennis	Konami	Konami	4
WWF Raw	Anchor	THQ	8
X2: Wolverine's Revenge	Genepool	Activision	5
X-Men: Next Dimension	Paradox	Activision	5

Audio**DNA**

Sound design for games—from simple footsteps to hyper-
bloated explosions—has come a long way since the days of
Pong. With the Xbox, almost anything is possible. Here's why.

Words - Jon M. Gibson   **Illustrations -** Andre Sibayan

It started with a pong.

With each bounce of the virtual ball—a nearly endless repetition—there was a slight, simple
sound, the very title of the game: *Pong.* With each redirection off the bordering walls: *pong.* Those
pongs, in steady progression, came faster and faster as players proved their skills. *Pong, pong, pong.*

Since 1975, that basic sound effect has come a long way; to stress the gargantuan leap, think horse-
drawn carriages compared to fusion-powered, intergalactic space vessels throttling along at 10 light years
per second. That pong, once a marvel of programming, has since evolved into an intricate mega-catalog of
variations, from high-frequency pongs to pongs landing on different kinds of surfaces to wet, sandy, or
sticky pongs. While there are still limitations, they are few as long as you've got the time, the cash to back it
up, and the proper hardware.

Microsoft's black behemoth Xbox is amped-up for such a task, tricked-out with all the outputs an audio-
phile could want from a console. Xbox's Dolby-primed design is just one of the reasons, but it's mostly the
free-form nature of the system's specs that developers embrace. Studios constantly rave about the ease of
programming an Xbox game; by all accounts, it's a playground for the creatively driven.

In Both Ears, Out None

Understanding the history of game audio is important, but it's more a personal experience than a 100 percent factual one, because just like music, sound can affect the players in many ways. "There have been several revolutions in game sound," Warren Spector says. Spector is studio director for Ion Storm, a development house that's making huge waves in the world of audio with its upcoming duo of first-person shooter sequels, *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War* and *Thief 3*.

"There was the moment when we moved from beeps and boops to something that could actually be described as music," he says. "There was the moment—characterized by *Wing Commander* for me—when sound cards took a huge leap forward and we could make music that sounded like a movie soundtrack, and sound effects that really helped place you in a game world. In 1997, *Thief* showed that audio could be as critical an element of a game design as graphics or code or anything else. Since then, I think we've been in a phase of constant refinement, rather than revolution."

"The first game that really had me sitting a few inches from the screen, almost feeling like I was standing in the same room as the character I was controlling, would be Red Storm's original *Rainbow Six*," Mark Lampert, audio engineer at Ion Storm, says. "It was a significant change of direction for games, both in gameplay and audio. Because of *Rainbow Six*'s realistic damage model—you might only survive one or two direct bullet hits, and a head shot is almost guaranteed to take you out immediately—it took away your tendency to always stay on the move with guns blazing as with other first-person shooters like *Quake*. So with the sudden attention to stealth and tactical movement from room to room, you're far more aware of the sounds around you than you would have been if you never stopped running or firing your weapon.

"So you're hearing the sound of fluorescent lights buzzing, water dripping, you and your squadmates' boots walking slowly across metal grate flooring, perhaps a machine idling in the corner," he says. "The mere sound of a guard's voice or footsteps is enough to send a tingle down your spine because you're so locked in the moment and everything feels very ultimate. I recall carefully sneaking my way through an oil refinery in the game, having adjusted to the subtle sounds of the inner crew cabins and other room sounds as I made my way through. Out of nowhere, there was a 'bang!'—my point of view tumbled to the ground and I heard the body hit the hollow, metal floor, all in well under a second. It about knocked me out of my chair. The sounds you grow accustomed to in that level reel you in and set you up for a slap in the face."

The "less is more" philosophy described by Lampert illustrates a new direction for games. *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*, still ranking high on Xbox software sales charts, follows the same grueling audio design template: The quieter the character moves, the more a player hears. Footsteps, certainly, are the most prominent, consistent sound, because when a character is lurking in the darkness, acting as an agent of death, every bit of noise increases the risk. At any given moment, if a character is rustling around just a little too much, his position could be compromised. Stealth is the name of the game, for both offensive and defensive reasons.

The Tinseltown Theory

Deus Ex 2, however, takes this concept to 11. Sound isn't as straight-laced in

real-life as it is in the gaming realm—there are elements like reverb to consider, and that's exactly what Ion Storm's engineers are toying with. Throughout the conspiracy-laden adventure, unloading a clip in a metal-grated hallway will vary acoustically from when you're outside walking through a brick-and-mortar alleyway, teasing the trigger of a submachine gun. Why? Smooth, angular steel reflects sound differently than coarse brick, just like domes that produce echoes and flat ceilings that don't. Sure, the overall effect will be modest, but Ion Storm guarantees that its audience will notice the change on a subconscious level—if not more.

Such a keen audio theorem and its resultant attention to detail doesn't stop there. While the numerous debates concerning movies versus games may never be settled, one thing is definitely clear: The film industry is no stranger to audio supremacy. Even more than those in the record industry, technicians working in Hollywood have a pitch-perfect ear for the craft, and none more than Dane A. Davis. His passion for the aural paid off in 1999, when he nabbed a naked, golden statuette named Oscar for his unprecedented application of sound in *The Matrix*. Minus the hard rock and techno soundtrack (which is a different department altogether), Davis' audio mixes for the sci-fi blockbuster swelled

beyond comparison, eating up more than five terabytes of hard drive space—that's over 5,000 gigabytes—to fill just about two hours of celluloid. Each sound effect lasts mere fractions of a second, so imagine the nightmare of concocting the ambient noises from scratch for one behemoth sequence after another (see: Recipe of a Window Crash).

No doubt, Davis is a compulsive perfectionist, and he's determined to bring that award-winning audio wit to an Xbox near you. "Our philosophy about sounds for movies is basically to always try to make things organic—try to make the sounds originate from the things you're looking at," he says. "If it's on the screen, it makes a sound; we try to think functionally." This forms the root of his company Danetracks' philosophy, which has already affixed sounds to *Enter the Matrix*, the companion game to the movie, as well as Electronic Arts' *Def Jam Vendetta*, and Ubi Soft's upcoming Xbox titles, *Rainbow Six: Raven Shield* and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*.

For *Reloaded*'s citywide car chase, Davis and his close-knit crew spent an entire day in a Southern California desert, pushing a '67 Nova to the very brink of breakdown. Onboard microphones recorded the car's clanks, skids, burnouts, and 500-horsepower roars, all in the name of authenticity. In fact, nothing is out of the question:
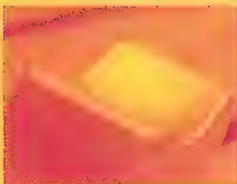
Davis even rented a construction yard crane so he could drop cars from hundreds of feet in the air, just to get the colossal collision on tape. "It's like sound-design boot camp," chortles Bryan Watkins, game audio director at Danetracks.

"We don't want anything to ever sound synthetic or contrived," Davis says. "And we also always try to make it interesting and expressive. It's all about the moods that you get and the feeling that you get—it's all about drama and storytelling. Ultimately, we'd like to take those same goals into the game world, and I think we do to an extent now. The game medium will certainly catch up with the film medium in terms of the capabilities—and probably overtake it; there's that

For us, audio is gameplay. We can't afford not to give it space, time, attention, and all.—Warren Spector

Recipe for a Window Crash

When martial-arts maven Niobe smashes through a window in *Enter the Matrix*, it may have seemed easy enough to toss a rock through a pane of glass, record it, and plop it into the game's sound effects file. That assumption, dear reader, is a gross misconception. Here are the ingredients with which Danetracks' hardcore audio geeks baked up the three-second scene:

Kiss one glass pane goodbye. Also, keep the stitches handy.

Step one: One large, commercial window pane is shattered.

Step two: Four smaller, thinner window pane are smashed.

Add: One low-frequency whoosh

Mix in: One mid-frequency whoosh

Stir in: One high-frequency whoosh

threshold that we're going to cross in the next two or three years."

The X Factor

While Davis and his crew were able to string together fairly complex sounds for the prerendered cinemas in *Enter the Matrix*, the limitations are still vast; the majority of the interactive action still lacked The *Matrix*'s trademark, cinematic luster. The whooshes audiences are familiar with—that slow-mo body sway sound, giving the impression of shifting energy—are still there, but only in a limited capacity. Davis recorded over 4,000 whooshes for the first two *Matrix* movies, but only 15 can be heard in the game, and only in abbreviated form. Such disparity is enormous, considering a typical game lasts between four to six hours. and can

Sound isn't as straight-laced in real-life and it's in the straight feeder. There are (other) elements to consider.

sometimes achieve daunting playtimes of over 100 hours; films, on the other hand, round off at just under two hours. Games are longer, yet their audio seems like an afterthought.

"It is what it is. It's just the space—the storage capacity," Davis says. "And that will hopefully all change and it won't be so much about that. Every

time you're playing in a game, even if you're at the same point, how can we keep it sounding different and interesting? A lot of that is about having the resources available, having 50 footsteps for a particular character on a particular surface as opposed to one."

"I'm constantly amazed that audio is treated so shabbily some places," Spector says. "Sound can be incredibly powerful in nailing the reality of a game world." Think of all those rancid, bargain-bin disasters you've welcomed into your home. Now think about why they were so dire. In a platformer, repetitive hopping effects—boing, boing, boing, boing, boing—don't add to your enjoyment; in an RPG, hearing the same sword clang several thousand times over the course of a game can become tiresome, to say the least.

Unlike its competition, Xbox offers the fuel to realize the visions of developers willing to allocate sufficient space to audio. It's the only system on the market with a standalone audio

chip—the PlayStation 2 and GameCube utilize an all-in-one motherboard—allowing designers more freedom when implementing sound.

"[Xbox] was designed from day one to have what we call multichannel audio architecture, meaning that every single game on Xbox is designed in terms of not a stereo sound field, but a 5.1 channel sound field," Jack Buser, manager of game developer relations at Dolby Labs, says. "That is the absolute baseline way of designing an Xbox game. If you look at the GameCube, it doesn't even have a

down the (Dane)tracks

Bryan Watkins is the game audio director at Danetracks (www.danetracks.com), a sound -design company specializing in feature films and interactive media.

When Danetracks takes on a game audio project, we learn as much as possible. We talk with the audio director to get background information, insight into characters, the tone of the game—as much detailed info as we can gather. Having very descriptive details helps us set a creative direction for the audio.

Ubi Soft is an amazingly innovative and creative company, and they are very good at conveying what they envision for their audio content. That said, Danetracks is creating the monster vocals and magical spells sounds for *Prince of Persia*. Simon Pressy, Ubi's audio content director, described monsters that were originally human but had been afflicted with a "Sands of Time" spell, which literally sucks all the bodily fluids out of its victims and leaves them dry. For us, the challenge was to create sounds that emulate that "sucked-dry" quality.

Danetracks is a feature-film sound-design company, so our approach to sound in games reflects our approach to sound in features. We like to custom record; we begin with organic sounds and manipulate them. For *Prince Of Persia*, empty crableg shells clacking, dried palm leaves, and light sand pours were custom-recorded and then layered in at a very low levels with the other vocal elements to create the bone-dry, arid effect the game needed. The spells, on the other hand, were very challenging since the game has incredible visuals when they are activated. We may build a spell and then rework it several times before we get the stamp of approval. It's all about experimentation and figuring out what works the best. We always want to build and turnover unique sound assets to our clients.
—Bryan Watkins

Dolby Digital output. If you look at the PS2, it was designed as a stereo game console, and later on we came in and retrofitted a technology called Dolby Pro-Logic 2 into software so that the players could have some sort of multi-channel experience.

But Dolby Pro-Logic 2 is not Dolby Digital. Dolby Digital is a real 5.1 channel technology, the exact same thing you hear in movie theaters," he continues. "It's able to, for instance, deliver discrete specific audio to any number of the channels all at the same time, so as a sound designer, you can work in this 5.1 channel sound field without having to think about the technology whatsoever. You can just think in terms of user experience. You don't have to make any compromises if you want a sound to come out of the right surround-sound speaker, you just tell the Xbox, 'Look, I want a sound to come out of the right surround-sound speaker,' and it does it."

Dolby 5.1 technology, enveloping users with an onslaught of sound via five speakers placed strategically throughout your home-entertainment mecca, does an excellent job of setting the Xbox on a higher podium than the rest. In-game audio has yet to reach cinematic proportions (since there is an interactive environment to contend with rather than passive, prescripted visuals), but the time is nearing.

"For us, audio is gameplay," Spector says. "We can't afford not to give it space, time, attention, and all. I wish we could give it more. In fact, the biggest change in game audio in the last five years may have nothing to do with what we do as developers—it may be that consoles are now hugely powerful sound generators and they're hooked up to home [theater] systems. It's way easier to get immersed in an audio environment when it's played at volume and actually surrounds you."

Milestones of the Future

The next-generation Xbox, reportedly due in 2005, will pack even more of a punch than users might expect, Buser says, but declined to elaborate. He would only go on to say, "You're going to see manufacturers look at [Xbox] and learn a lot from it. The Xbox guys are a step beyond everyone else in that they've already gone through one generation of game hardware that supports this kind of wonderful audio technology. They have the benefit of hindsight now, where they can look back on the Xbox and ask, 'What works, what didn't work, what do game audio people want, what do they need, what can I put in there now, and what kind of things can we take out now or simplify?'" Xbox 2 is also primed to support an icon-based audio-control interface, Buser says, so sound designers may not have to know a lick of game programming to put their synthesizing skills to work.

Until then, it's up to the likes of *Deus Ex 2*, *Halo 2*, *Doom III*, and a handful of other titles to impress players with an all-encompassing experience—visually and aurally—making up for those games that don't. "Think of the game industry now that it's 30-odd years old and compare it to the film industry," Alex Brandon, lead audio engineer at Ion Storm, says. "We're still in our infancy." ■

THE ARCH

David Perry made a star out of an earthworm, birthed a messiah, and entered the matrix. *Xbox Nation* makes him stand in the fire.

Developer Profile
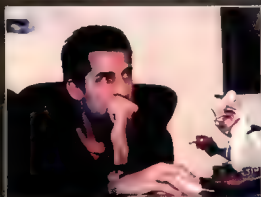
Name: David Perry
Company: Shiny Entertainment
Position: President and CEO
Selected Gameography:
The Terminator, Cool Spot, Global Gladiators, Aladdin, Earthworm Jim, Wild 9, MDK, R.C. Stunt Copter, Messiah, Sacrifice, Enter the Matrix.

David Perry has done a great deal as President of Shiny Entertainment, Perry has guided his company through the good (*Messiah, Earthworm Jim*), the great (*MDK, Sacrifice*), and, now, the problematic. Shiny's latest effort, *Enter The Matrix*, has been critically hammered for its buggy and repetitive play, stiff animation, and generally uninspired feel.

The game, nonetheless, has recorded two million-plus copies sold since its release, and will likely clock in as what the suits like to call "a commercial success." But Perry still has his feet over the flames, and *Xbox Nation* spoke with the man about what may be his magnum opus or, perhaps, his Waterloo.

If our line of questioning seems a bit restrained, attribute it to the fact that Perry simply refused to speak about "negative feedback or story angles on the movie or the game."

"Denial," the Architect tells a flustered Neo in *The Matrix Reloaded*, "is the most predictable of all human responses."

Xbox Nation: Now that you've had some time to step back and look at the final product, what part of *Enter the Matrix* are you happiest with?

David Perry: I think we're happy with the fact that we could tie the game and the movie together in a form that gives the player an expanded experience of the movie. If you watch the movie and play the game, there's more information about what happened in the movie. For example, in the movie they just cut to this power plant exploding, but in the game you're the one blowing it up. I think that's probably the best thing about the game.

XBN: What were you most disappointed with?
Perry: Most disappointed by? I think there were parts of the game that could've been better. We were very happy with the fighting. I think it's better than that in just about any game I've seen. The driving was one part we wanted to make better. I kept trying to tell everyone that this isn't a driving game, but they don't listen. People just don't get it—they think that if you're going to get in a car you have to be playing *Grand Theft Auto*, or something like that. In this game, the idea is not to let you drive, but to move you from A to B and to snipe out of a window. The idea wasn't to provide a full driving game, but I think if we did it again we'd probably add more to it to make it feel like a more traditional driving game. I think the tendency is for people to compare these little parts to another game, so we're being compared to dedicated driving games. The hovercraft level is the same kind of thing. It was basically designed to fit in the story and let the player run from sentinels. That was the idea; it could've lasted 15 minutes or it could've lasted 15 seconds, and so I probably would've added more to that.

XBN: *Enter the Matrix* is Shiny's most commercially successful, but its least critically successful. Does that bother you?
Perry: No, it doesn't bother me. Critical success—you have to "free your mind" a little bit, because this game was made for the mass market, not for a writer on a particular Web site. With those guys, if you're not making another *Quake* game they're going to be pretty cynical about it. *Half-Life 2* is a great game for them, and this is a game for the mass market. And it's absolutely not true that the game's not well-received.

...ITECT?

we have unbelievably high ratings from the people who bought the game, not the hardcore reviewers. Our job is to please people and make them feel they got a good value for their money. I've read a ton of great reviews from people who bought it, not from the people who just compare it to whatever they want to compare it to. So I don't feel bad about it, but you have to decide what you're going for, and we wanted to make a game that was easy and satisfying for the mass market.

XBN: In terms of actual gameplay, who contributed the most to the game design: you, the Wachowski Brothers, or your team?
Perry: The team. I think there was a time when someone could just, like, completely design a game without

I think that even if *Enter the Matrix* was a *Tetris* game that **people still would've have bought it for the footage.**

anyone else's input, but I don't think it's that way any more. I think Nintendo still tries to pretend that they do that, but it's just not true, there are a lot of hardworking people at Nintendo making their game. It's the same at Shiny. Basically there are a lot of hardworking designers who make most of the actual gameplay, and the Wachowski brothers just created the framework in which the game happens.

XBN: How was working with the Wachowski Brothers? Were they very involved, or were they too

busy with the films?
Perry: The Wachowski Brothers were surprisingly involved. They were involved with everything that the public would see related to the game, including approving every screen shot that went into a magazine. They were constantly getting demos of the game sent to them, and they literally went to that level of detail. There's a trailer for the game and an advert on television. Shiny had nothing to do with those, they were all by them. So they were incredibly hands-on, from that point of view.

XBN: What do they think of the game?
Perry: The Wachowski Brothers really like the game. They were really pleased with the way it feels like you're actually inside their story, experiencing their world. They're really pleased with the implementation of Bullet Time, and I think we have the best implementation of Bullet Time in any game, and I think we have the best hand-to-hand fighting in any third-person action game. The game keeps getting compared to the *Max Paynes* of this world, but the fact is that you can do so much more. You can run on the walls, you can do full-on kung fu, you can drive, you can fly, there's a hacking system, there's Hollywood-grade visuals produced by some of the top people in the world. You're not just running from room to room killing people in

some New York building. They're pleased with the overall product.

XBN: You've stated before that every game needs a "hook" or a best feature. So what's *Enter the Matrix*'s hook?
Perry: The footage. There's a lot of great stuff there for the hardcore *Matrix* fan, and I think that even if *Enter the Matrix* was a *Tetris* game that people still would've have bought it for the footage. There's some quite controversial footage in there, there's the trailer for the *Revolutions* movie, and lots of other interesting stuff. So that's definitely the biggest "hook." It's also a first for Hollywood game integration, and I gave a speech on the subject. I think there's a second guy, and that is the fight choreography by the choreographer of *The Matrix*, Master Wu Ping. Master Wu Ping doesn't do videogames, so the only way were able to get him in because the Wachowski Brothers asked him personally to work on the game, so he did that and we've ended up with some unbelievable motion capture data. We had to make a lot of new technology to get as much of that in as possible and I think we pulled it off. There are a huge number of moves in there, most of which are based on the situation you find yourself in. Are there two guys around you? Are you fighting near a wall? Are you just doing a standard attack? That's all in there, and it lets the player look and feel like he's kicking ass. It's that fluidity of moving from punching and kicking and them shooting him point-blank all in one big move that makes the player feel tough.

XBN: How long was the game in development?
Perry: The game's been in development since early

2001, and it was on the shelves in May 2003. So the actual development was about two years—but that's not really the truth. Before then we already knew that we were going to do this deal and had access to the script, so when the deal was signed in 2001, we already running at that point.

XBN: What's the hardest part of transitioning cinematic intensity into videogames?

Perry: I think the hardest part is making you believe that you're inside of a story. Psychology says that every time you break that, or when anything goes wrong, there's a sort of rejection and you break them out of it. For example, load times. We're going to try to rectify this in our next project, and we have ideas on how to do that beyond just limiting our load times. The bigger you make your level and the more stuff you put in your level just takes up memory, and you have to start giving things up, usually, but there are other ways to do this, and I think you'll see some in our next projects.

XBN: The Matrix takes place in a world where the impossible is possible. What were the difficulties in mapping this to a controller?

Perry: One thing we tried to do that we thought would be clever was make it so that you were always shooting or fighting. This was to make the control layout a lot easier. If you shoot away from an enemy and hit the button you'd shoot your gun. If you were up close, you'd punch them. So the idea was to make it easy, but once we started letting people play the game, every single group said they'd prefer to punch and shoot any time they wanted to. To enable that we had to completely redefine the controls, and since then, we've found that those people prefer the control a million times more. The hardest part of designing controls is predicting what the gamers want, I think.

XBN: Do you see Hollywood helping the actual games improve, or just the production values?

Perry: Absolutely not. They won't help the games themselves. If it was that way, we would have to worry about Hollywood, and they're no great threat because they're not game makers. They can help us to make better stories and we can help them better understand how games work. The complexity of making games is quite unbelievable now and getting harder by the day, and they're not equipped to handle that. We're always going to be the videogame people.

XBN: videogames are a _____ now, and all of the _____

them. Is this surprising to you? Is their interest justified?

Perry: I don't think it's going to make a big difference because this is the second or third time it's happened. In 1994, we went through exactly the same cycle. They all read about this industry and some movie companies started their own videogame companies, but I think this time we are seeing some new things. Activision has Spider-Man and EA has Lord of the Rings, showing that these relationships are starting to work and be very productive for both sides, and the quality of the games compared to the old games is phenomenal. I think that's a healthy trend, and I hope it continues.

XBN: But won't that also bring an increase in the number of crap licensed games, too?

Perry: I think that's true, but there's a law that ends _____ If you download those that weren't busy, that won't sell. If you make really, really lame-o products, they won't sell, and ultimately you'll go bankrupt. The market takes care of that, and that's the price you pay if the market doesn't want it.

XBN: Due to the rising costs of game development, the industry has become increasingly risk-averse, relying more heavily on sequels and licenses than ever before. Is there any reason to expect this trend lessen as Hollywood gets involved, or could things get even worse?

Perry: Hollywood has these complicated equations that they use that do a very, very fair risk analysis and allow groundbreaking movies to be made and determine why they're going to fund it and why they're going to let it exist. Our risk analysis is less sophisticated, and until the equations become more complicated I don't think we're going to see that trend lessen.

An example I might give you is that I want to make a game called Zability Boy, and they say, "Well, I don't know what that means and so I don't want to devote millions of dollars to it." But you say, "Well, wait a sec," and tell them that it's going to cost them $20, and then they laugh and say, "There's no way!" then you say that it's designed by Peter Molyneux, [Shigeru] Miyamoto and Hideo Kojima, and the scr _____

cetera., and you'll start to see them [become] interested. That kind of risk analysis sort of exists in our industry, but until the companies have all of the data they need to make better decisions. They need to start getting to that level of detail, and if they do you'll start seeing more projects that might seem a little risky—but when you look at the backbone of the

project, you'll see why they decided to give it a try.

XBN: What do you think is the most unevolved element of games today?

Perry: I think the most unevolved part is the A.I. in games. Most characters in games now are like goldfish, goldfish that have been told, "You say this line when you hit this point." We have much, much, much further to go in the A.I. realm. It's moving forward, but there isn't much technology that actually works well. Strategies need to be made by the game and we'll need sentence forming in the game. So, say, you might go back to someone and they'll say, "Oh, you're back already," but they made that sentence themselves and wasn't pretyped by a designer, so that if you come back to him again he won't just play the same sound bite a second time. The first person to crack that walnut is going to shock people. Half-Life had that feeling even though it was scripted, and that was really amazing at the time.

XBN: What did you think of Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers as a game?

Perry: The guy who made that game was Neil Young, and I used to work with him at Virgin on the Terminator game. He's actually the guy in the game— we photographed him and put him in. I was the programmer on that game. So given that history, I was really impressed with the job that they did.

There are basically six different ways of making games based on movies: The first one is just licensing the name of the movie, but not getting any of the rights to the story, character, etc., and there's no relationship _____ _____ and even a very bad _____ _____ out of those movies _____ _____ of the people _____ that all of the _____ Then there's number _____, which is what EA's The Lord _____

_____ to everything and that's a beautiful experience, the graphics are authentic and the music's good. That _____ _____ instead of retelling the story in the movie, you add to the experience and create new content and use the characters from the movie in the game.

XBN: When do you think games will truly be considered a form of art?

Perry: I think videogames are an art form already, as much as movies and music are today—they're art to the people who play and like them. For many, _____ asked them if they wanted to see a movie or play _____

A scene really hard to argue that it's not an art form these days; but I think when the next-generation hardware comes, or the generation after that, we'll see some truly aesthetic games that are just absolutely beautiful, and worlds that people just won't want to leave. That's the most exciting thing about this business, it's always growing and there are always things we can look forward to.

One thing we tried to do that we thought would be clever was **make it so that you were always shooting or fighting.**

XBN: Given unlimited time and resources, what kind of game would you make?

Perry: I have the idea for a game I've always wanted to make, and I've written down the design for it. The hardware isn't even close to being able to do it, though, and I think it's about 20 years away. It requires the Turing Test [Editor's Note: The Turing Test was devised to determine if a computer program is sentient.] to be solved, sentence construction, and a proper understanding of what's said, and true speech synthesis, and common sense. There's actually a group working on this now. So far they've entered over a million things that the either compute common sense, and they're not even close to emulating it. basic idea is that the world is alive and intelligent, and that as you progress and do efforts, things will change and interact with you.

XBN: If you could make any movie into a game, what would it be?

Perry: I would be psyched. Most games that have been done to death now, and few things that we want to do with games. Game-maker don't want to license an original movie. I would really like to do a game based on movies, so it really wouldn't matter to me if I get to keep at that.

XBN: What else are you hard at working on now?

Perry: Right now we're kind of taking a break and kind of just figured out what we want to do. We've got 83 on it now, deciding what went right and what went wrong, doing this we can start planning for the next game, which I can't reveal yet. I hope it blows everyone away. ■

SCHOOL
OF THE NILE

**Musician, producer, and leader of Chic,
Nile Rodgers rocks out on *Outlaw Volleyball***

Nile Rodgers is the coolest man on the planet. He's produced albums for David Bowie, Duran Duran, Debbie Harry, Mick Jagger, Madonna, and the B-52s; won more awards than you have blood cells; and rocked harder than a paper boat on the high seas. He drives a 1986 Porsche Targa with a slant nose. There were only 18 of these cars ever made, and when Rodgers rides up in it, he says, "It looks like it came from the future."

Clearly, you are not fit to polish his guitar picks, nor would you even be qualified, say, to get the man a sandwich. You are, however, welcome to bask in his gentle glow as *Xbox Nation* talks to him about his love for videogames and his work scoring Simon & Schuster Interactive's forthcoming *Outlaw Volleyball*, a follow-up to the surprisingly good *Outlaw Golf*.

Xbox Nation: **Tell us about your involvement in *Outlaw Volleyball*, omitting no earthly details.**
Nile Rodgers: First, what they did is the team came to my house, they put a gun to my head, they gagged me, they chloroformed me. And when I woke up I was sitting in their studio and they're going, "Okay, we want some music in this game and it has got to be hot and it has got to be the best. When we start playing this thing, it has got to make us go nuts."

XBN: **You were a fan of *Outlaw Golf*, weren't you?**
Rodgers: Absolutely. As a matter of fact, a band that I just finished working with, between takes we would sit there and play *Outlaw Golf*. We were nuts. As a matter of fact, I almost had the audacity to put it on the budget—to somehow get Simon & Schuster Interactive to sort of pay for our downtime because we got so addicted to the game.

XBN: **What attracted you to *Outlaw Volleyball*?**
Rodgers: I have to be really honest with you, we became big fans of the characters from golf. When I first played golf, I didn't think it would cool and the artists who I was working with said to me, "Nile, you won't believe how cool it is." I said, "Yes, right."

XBN: **Can you mention which band you were work-**ing with at the time, or is that kind of a secret?
Rodgers: No, no, they're called Soul Decision. They're on Universal on MCA. They're sort of a young band, they had a gold record about two years ago and people sort of consider them like sort of sons of Chic [Rodgers' band, best known for its 1978 hit "Le Freak"] because their records sort of sounds like the kind of music that I would do with my band.

People actually thought that I had produced their first record, so it was interesting that we ended up working together because, in fact, we hadn't. Then the next thing you know, the leader of the band, the guy Trevor is a super, super game fanatic. When we started working together he started turning me on to all of these games that were his favorites and it just happened that one of his favorite games is *Outlaw Golf*. He's a real connoisseur; I mean, he doesn't play lame games. He only plays the coolest stuff.

XBN: **Speaking of sons of Chic, is there any way you might see fit to include the red-headed stepchild of chic, Vanilla Ice, in the game's soundtrack? In his own words he's a "lyrical poet" and he really, really needs the work.**
Rodgers: [*Laughing*] Unfortunately, the soundtrack is a wrap. We're done but maybe on *Outlaw Golf 2*.

XBN: **Are you going to do the score for *Outlaw Golf 2*?**
Rodgers: I can't imagine not doing it. This team has been so fantastic. We've had such a great time. We love the product.

I've sent [the soundtrack] out to a lot of other competitive studios just to get their feedback on it. People have called me and said, "Nile, the soundtrack is awesome, the product is great, and people really dig it." So it makes me proud because I know what's out there, and other people have really good vibes about it.

XBN: **Do you have a specific philosophy when it comes to creating soundtracks?**

XBN: **Did the publisher or developer give you any instructions as to how the soundtrack should be done?**
Rodgers: No, that's what was great about it. The thing about this soundtrack that was fantastic is that it worked and grew up on its own. At first, what we did is we gravitated towards mainly hip-hop and we tried that and some of the hip-hop worked great, but then the action took on a more frenetic pace and hip-hop traditionally is close to 100 beats per minute. You can't have a game with the pacing of volleyball at 100 beats per minute throughout the game, so certain characters and certain vibe have a more sort of—I don't know—pothead pace. So a pothead pace would go along with hip-hop, but some of the other stuff is real intense like skater- and beach-punk, so it's got to move.

XBN: **Can you give us a couple of specific examples of the songs you've chosen or the artists?**
Rodgers: We have a band called Diffuser. I've actually known about these guys for a while and when Hollywood got down with it, and I guess Diffuser are probably fans of the game, everything seemed to work. They really melded with it perfectly.

This other kid that we found almost by accident named DJ Ashba, I've got to tell you man, I'm so hyped on this kid. This kid DJ Ashba, not only did he nail it but his song actually has a great lyric in it that talks about how he wished that summer wouldn't go away and you know obviously, the main character or one of the main characters in *Volleyball* and in the Outlaw Sports Series is the girl Summer. So it was just the perfect song. It had the right vibe, the right flavor, and the lyrics married perfectly. You would almost think that he was part of the script.

XBN: **What's the coolest thing about the soundtrack, aside from its director?**
Rodgers: The coolest thing about it, in my humble opinion, is that last night when I drove up to CVS to get my razors and stuff like my new automatic toothbrush to go away to Atlanta tomorrow, I drove up and there were some kids standing out front of CVS.

When I pulled up obviously, I had the [soundtrack] music blasting and they went "Holy shit man, that car is cool, what year is that?" I told them what year my car was and they were like, "Oh man, that's amazing. Hey, yo dude, what was that you were playing?"

That's the coolest thing is that kids who were standing out—just parking lot kids—thought that the soundtrack was as cool as my car and my car is amazingly cool. I should have a videogame on my car. That's my own personal opinion, you know what I'm saying?

XBN: **Given your vast musical experience, who do you think would win in a fight, [Daryl] Hall or [John] Oates?**
Rodgers: [*Laughing*] Well, that's interesting. Hall would probably win in a fight if it were verbal, and Oates might win in a fight because he might be able to cheap shot him and kick him in the balls or something you know what I mean? He might be shorter but he's cool, though. I don't know. ∎

> ...and Oates might win in a fight because he might be able to **cheap shot him and kick Hall in the balls or something...**

These guys are real serious gamers. I mean all they do is play *Halo* and *Splinter Cell* and *GoldenEye* and all that sort of stuff. They're like big nutty, nutty gamers and they're deep into it, so when I saw them playing *Outlaw Golf*, I didn't think that would be interesting to them because they're big first-person shooter guys and like all this action and adventure stuff.

When we played it, the game was so cool, and then when they showed me the whole beatdown thing, it was hysterical. It just works as a game. We loved it and I got hooked. Now, I sit at home and play it all the time.

Rodgers: Yes, that it's subordinate to the overall subject that we're helping to define. If you don't help to convey the message of what the project is all about and you sort of have this independent mindset, it does not work even though it could be cool.

Like the last thing I want somebody to do is say, "Man, I was playing that game and the music was cooler than the game." It doesn't work; the game should be really cool and then afterwards you go, "Holy shit, the soundtrack was amazing." That to me is the way that you work on a project. It artistically doesn't work if they don't support what the main vision is and the primary project is the videogame. These are all subordinate elements to gameplay.

XTRA
Out of the Box

CONSUMPTION JUNCTION

When work and home become ultimately unfulfilling,
this is one greedy-ass train you won't want to miss.

Eboy HELLO

Manufacturer: Laurence King Publishing
http://www.eboy.com
Price: $30

Perennial masters of the pixel, eBoy have released a book compiling its entire image database, and it's a doozy. Included in this 300-page design epic are thousands of robots, cars, guns, and girls, populating beautiful (and beautifully gory) cityscapes dripping with life and personality. This is truly inspired work, and the detail embedded into every pixelated persona will please anyone whose heart beats in 8-bit blood.
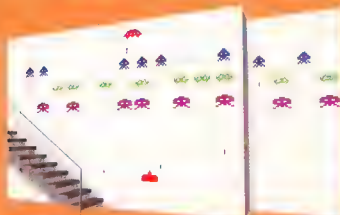
Blik

Manufacturer: SurfaceGraphics
http://www.whatisblik.com
Price: $30

For those who like their walls with a smattering of *Space Invader*, Blik surface graphics should please. These high-quality plastic graphics can be readily affixed to nearly any surface, and then easily removed once you tire of them. The invaders have made their way onto *Xbox Nation*'s wall, but other options—including *Asteroids*, *Tempest*, and *Galaga*—are on their way, not to mention Blik's ability to create custom graphics sized anywhere from 4 to 40 square feet.

Nokia 3650

Manufacturer: Nokia
http://www.nokia.com
Price: $300 (cheaper with contract)

Not only does Nokia's newest camera phone take high-quality digital photos, it even captures full-motion video and streams animation and video from the internet via RealPlayer. It features Bluetooth support (read: beam files back and forth between your computer and your phone), a host of ear-pleasing polyphonic ring-tones, a built-in calendar, and the highest-resolution display we've seen on any cell phone to date. These are some serious Star Trek sh*t, if you like the future, you'll want the Nokia 3650.

Xbox Action Replay

Manufacturer: Datel
http://www.datel.co.uk
Price: $39.99

Cheaters never prosper, but with the Action Replay they can kick ass and win time and again. This handy-dandy 8MB memory card comes jam-packed with preset "Powersaves," enabling players to access cheats for Xbox's hottest games. Use these saves to reach every level in a game, unlock hidden characters, and gain invulnerability or unlimited lives. In addition, players with an Action Replay and a PC can download new Powersaves via the Web site codejunkies.com.

Metal Material Model: Strike Gundam

Manufacturer: Bandai
http://www.toyboxdx.com
Price: $65

The stark frame you see to the left is the diecast metal skeleton of Bandai's latest mechanized warrior: the GAT-X105 Strike Gundam. Weighing in at over 14 ounces, this mean machine comes with a detailed set of armor which snaps snugly onto Gundam's torso, arms, and legs. And because the toy is the essence of its skeletal inner-frame, the Strike Gundam features both heft and articulation for maximum poseability. Is it a model—or is it a toy? You decide.

Oyster Dock

Manufacturer: Sherpaq Moobie Technology
http://www.oysterdock.com
Price: $199.95

For those of us whose laptop computers spend infinitely more time on our desks than in our laps, the Oyster Dock has arrived. A simple piece of relatively un-electronic machinery, the Oyster Dock holds nearly any sized laptop upright and at eye-level, while simultaneously providing a four-port USB hub and clearing desk space for a proper full-size keyboard. Those with front-loading CD drives beware, but others should do their necks and wrists a favor with this little slice of ergonomic heaven.

Treamcast

Manufacturer: Sega, sort of
http://www.lik-sang.com
Price: $150 - $200

Be forewarned: The "Treamcast" or traveling Dreamcast is not technically a saleable product as it infringes on Sega's many copyrights and trademarks. That said, this portable Dreamcast, with its built-in backlit LCD screen, car adapter, remote control device for MP3s and VCDs, and two unique controllers, is about the coolest thing on the entire planet. They're selling this beauty in Hong Kong with its own snazzy "Treamcast" carrying bag. Very cool. Very much illegal.

SPIN

Things that go round and round

On the seventh day, exhausted from all the running, jumping, and first-person shooting shenanigans, God rested. Below are the DVDs and CDs (s)he enjoyed.

Artechre
Draft 7.30 (Warp Records)

For those curious as to what hip-hop might sound like if it were translated into binary code and then performed by the sound barrier, Autechre's seventh full-length delivers like UPS. *Draft 7.30* sees the duo discharging its unique brand of systematized sonic fire over 10 tracks of distorted madness. The result amounts to one of the most intricately constructed albums ever produced, with layers of pinpointed, raucous imagery working together to create a rhythmic, monstrous whole. Though a hard listen, *Draft 7.30* is music made three dimensional.
Evan Shamoon

King Geedorah, aka MF Doom
Take Me to Your Leader (Big Dada)

Buy *Take Me to Your Leader* immediately, because it is simply phenomenal. The beats are hard, the rhymes are smart, and the vocal samples (taken from *Godzilla* and other Japanese flicks) are supremely orchestrated. Each song is packed with subtlety and can be listened to repeatedly with something new jumping out each time. The lyrics interact with the beats in a manner that only MC/producers the likes of El-P, Madlib, and MF Doom can accomplish; most importantly, Doom's voice, flow, and production style remain utterly unique.
Nate Denver

Avatars Offline is a fascinating documentary about massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs) and the people who love them. With commentary from game designers, academics, and gamers, *Avatars* demystifies the overlooked and nerdified subculture of role-playing games. The first feature-length film on the subject, Avatars examines the evolution of role playing from *Dungeons & Dragons* to *Star Wars: Galaxies*, and includes footage of fan fairs, Lord British's medieval weapons collection (including an authentic vampire-killing kit), and the first couple to get married via *EverQuest*. The PBS-quality *Avatars* is something of a more scholarly *Trekkies* (with less of

Avatars Offline, 2003
Dallica Pictures

the freak factor), and required viewing for those who consider themselves graduates of Videogames 101.

Avatars covers gaming-life issues, from social gaming to drug-like addiction. There are poignant interviews with people whose social lives have been deeply affected by online gaming—from one who quit his job to play *EverQuest* full-time, to another's experience with failed flings prompted by online flirtation. It examines the phenomenon of reinventing oneself online by switching gender, class line, and physique. *Avatars Offline* is interesting, compelling, and loaded with life lessons to be learned.
Raina Lee

Biggie and Tupac
Ventura Distribution

Since Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls met their makers six years ago, hip-hop heads have grasped for answers. Plenty of murder theories exist: Some say Puff Daddy's thugs killed Tupac for sleeping with Biggie's wife, while others swear the FBI was secretly responsible. Simpletons! Everybody knows 50 Cent pulled the trigger. And Biggie defected to Cuba, where he's living in a bunker, ghostwriting for Eminem.

Nick Broomfield, the mercenary documentary filmmaker responsible for *Biggie and Tupac* has his own theory. His film plays like a detective story, ultimately implicating a conspiracy of crooked cops and rap

icons. If you've seen his other films, such as *Kurt and Courtney* or *Heidi Fleiss*, you know Broomfield's modus operandi: He likes to confront his subjects unannounced in order to catch them off guard. Whether you love or hate his sensational style, he deserves credit for landing plenty of illuminating interviews with those closest to the victims. There's even an appearance from Suge Knight, Mr. Death Row himself, filmed in prison.

A must-see for hip-hop fans and conspiracy theorists alike.
Matt Sammons

Love, Liza

By tackling social buzz-killers such as suicide, grief, and addiction, *Love, Liza* was understandably ignored during its theatrical release amid the 2002 holiday lineup. Yet, despite all its heavy, unfestive themes, it is surprisingly hilarious, and unexpectedly liberating.

Having just lost his wife, Liza, to an unexplained suicide, Web developer Wilson Joel (Philip Seymour Hoffman) wanders numbly through a suburban world of small talk and uncomfortable silences. On a parallel track is Liza's mother Mary Ann (Kathy Bates), who longs for Wilson's company but remains livid with him for his inability to read Liza's suicide note. As Wilson's

despair spirals out of control, he takes up gas huffing as an escapist methodology, befriends a boorish radio control hobbyist (so he can justify buying all that gas), and journeys into his own heart of darkness.

With outstanding performances from nearly the entire cast, *Love, Liza* is singularly carried on the shoulders of Hoffman, who so convincingly becomes a smoldering wreck of a human being, you don't know whether to hug him or slap him. Watching it with a date will inevitably lead to drinking shots of Bushmills, chased by cans of watered-down Pabst. Cheers.
Che Chou

The Worst of Ed Wood Boxed Set

Crappy filmmaker Ed Wood was more famous for the women's clothing he liked to wear than his body of work—at least until his life was chronicled in a big-budget movie starring Johnny Depp. A transvestite with a bad ear, an auteur with no sense of the dramatic, and a man so untalented he makes Pauly Shore look like Leonardo Da Vinci, Wood's legacy has been packaged into one, unintentionally hilarious four-disc set. *The Worst of Ed Wood Boxed Set* includes the terrible *Jail Bait*, the brutally stinktastic *Glen or Glenda*, the putrid *Bride of the Monster*, and possibly the worst murder of cellulite ever, *Plan 9*

From Outer Space. Featuring inimitable quotes such as, "We are all interested in the future, for that, my friend, is where you and I will spend the rest of our lives;" actors who would need talent to suck (including a drug-addled Bela Lugosi); and an absolute absence of plot, logic, continuity, or style; these films transcend badness into a wonderful sort of goodness—for a tenth of a second. And then, the moment passed, they return to suckitude. But long after 10,000 better films come and go, they'll still be marveling at Wood and his stabs at glory.
Greg Orlando

G.I. Joe: The Original Miniseries

Sing it with us, children of the '80s—*G.I. Joe: The Original Miniseries* has finally arrived on DVD. This two-disc set includes 10 episodes from the animated show's first two miniseries, *A Real American Hero* and *The Revenge of Cobra*.

In *A Real American Hero,* terrorist operation Cobra builds a MASS (Molecular Assembler Scrambler Sender) device with the ability to teleport anything, anywhere, making it the perfect tool for taking over the world. In *The Revenge of Cobra*, the villain Destro builds a Weather Dominator which, as you can probably guess, controls the weather. Again, Cobra seeks

world domination and the military chaps in G.I. Joe must foil the evil plan.

Rhino has remastered these classic episodes, so they look sharper than you remember them. It's a trip down memory lane seeing gun-toting do-gooders Duke, Scarlett, and the whiny Cobra Commander, and though no one ever dies in the world of *Joe*, it still makes for fantastic, slam-bam action. One of the extras included on the DVD is an interview with writers Marv Wolfman and Ron Freidman.

So now you know. And knowing is —nah, screw it.
Mike Fasolo

Freeform

Simon Pyke, the man behind Freeform, has put out 11 releases on nearly as many music labels. Having gained tenure at the houses of Skam and Warp Records, Pyke's angular, textured, experimental style of electro has turned on audio technocrats since the early '90s. His latest release, aptly titled *Condensed*, is an easy-to-digest compilation of Freeform's grandest and most skittish moments. As expected with a "best of," there's little filler here, but plenty of beautifully orchestrated, algorithmic sonic tapestries. Don't just shake your ass—boogie the intellect.
Che Chou

Mogwai

Soft, quiet, heartbreaking melodies followed by heavy, incandescent, gut-wrenching riffage—that's the musical formula Mogwai used to adhere to, but on *Happy Songs*, the band's latest LP, the maturity shows in Scotland's brooding post-rock heroes. These new instrumentals still teem with Mogwai's brand of bittersweet irony and flirtations with aural extremes, but they're not so predictably explosive. Songs are given time and space to grow as an organic whole—feeding, morphing, growing, and rustling—like a discontented fetus in your inner ear.
Che Chou
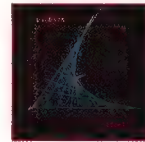
Pinback

Pinback's blend of articulated guitar work along with an acute sense of unpredictability have made them the band to keep an eye on within indie rock circles. With *Offcell*, it continues to inhabit its own world of melodious, clipped, guitar-led pop songs, but it also seem to push farther out into uncharted, more baroque lands. *Offcell* works within the borders of pop, but through an inventive use of piano, skewed melodies, and Technicolor arrangements, Pinback is at the vanguard of a less constrained, more precise, and cryptic take on pop music.
Jon Pruett

INBOX

Last Issue...

Xbox Nation taught us all how to love again with its fine, lemony-fresh scent and thorough exploration of all things Xbox. If you were asleep or dead, woe be to you, as the magazine had in-depth stories of three of the hottest Xbox games being worked on across the pond: Big Blue Box Studios' epic *Fable*, Intrepid's beautifully gruesome "life is suffering" simulator *B.C.*, and Climax's fine Japanese-styled RPG *Sudeki*. There was more, too, in the form of previews for such hot hits-to-be as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Sega GT Online*, *Crimson Skies*, *XIII*, *The Movies*, and so many more it would kill our hands to type them in. Oh, and there were delightfully devilish critiques of such bottom feeders as *Batman: Dark Tomorrow* and RoboSlop (er, *RoboCop*), as well as a series of commentaries on such excellent titles as *Phantasy Star Online*, *NBA Street Vol. 2*, and *Burnout 2*. If that wasn't enough, there were interviews aplenty, news printed to fit, and a fine *je ne sais quoi* its editors can't poinpoint. Not if they tried.

I read the article on page 18 of *Xbox Nation*'s issue #7 ["Conversation Nation"]. While both sides had great points, I personally believe that patches resulting in game improvements are wrong. Let me explain; I am a true Xbox supporter. I picked up the console on launch day as well as Live one year later. However the only title that I was interested in purchasing for Live was *Ghost Recon*. Now what a lot of people didn't realize is that *Ghost Recon* had some form of connection glitch and it affected, not a lot, but some of the users. This problem, to my knowledge, was never published in an Xbox magazine even though I e-mailed the official one about it. Bottom line, I had to wait months before a patch arrived and I was able to play *Recon* online. I shelled out $50 for a game, $50 for an ineffective kit, and another $50 because I purchased a cable Internet service specifically for Live.

Some people may find why didn't you simply purchase *MechAssault* or just play the demos? Those are the people who can feel free to send me a check for *Ghost Recon*. I paid my money. There is no reason the game shouldn't work. They had beta testing for months with thousands of users. The Xbox is not a computer and if any idiot out there remembers Big Bill Gates was very clear when he said it was a console and not to be compared to PC. Additional content is fine, but to simply play the game the way it is supposed to be: Shame on the designer, the publisher, and most of all, Microsoft

Zach Shepherd

Andrew Vestal's "Tokyo Tribe" conclusion in the June-July issue of *Xbox Nation* hit Microsoft right where it

needed to be hit. The slow trickle of exclusive games that have flopped out of Microsoft Japan are weak at best. That means Microsoft is giving the Japanese gamer no reason to even consider buying an Xbox. This in turn gives Japanese developers very little incentive to make games specifically for the Xbox. Buying an established Japanese developer is about the only hope Microsoft has to remedy this situation. It may cause some initial grumbling in the Japanese gaming community, but good games would cure that.

Ripe for the picking is Sega, which is still hemorrhaging money from the Dreamcast, and whose mergers with Sammy and Namco have both fallen through. Even the mighty Capcom was recently forced to cancel 10 games because of lackluster sales These are just two examples from a sluggish Japanese market that Microsoft could, and should, take advantage of.

Imagine what an exclusive (insert your favorite Japanese game franchise here) could do for sales in Japan and in the United States. Hell, imagine what any first-class Japanese RPG would do for Xbox sales anywhere.

Yet, E3 2003 has come and gone and all Microsoft has proven is that it's become king of the first-person shooters. It's done this while letting almost every Japanese franchise system seller go to PlayStation 2. And while shooters sell well enough in the United States, they don't sell squat in Japan. To be fair, maybe Microsoft has something up its sleeve for the Japanese game convention later this year, and maybe not.

Without solid Japanese support for Xbox, and especially its sequel,

Microsoft should get used to being second banana in the videogame console world, and dead last in Japan, for as long, or as short, as it's in the market.

Chris Huntley

Chris Huntley, we like the cut of your jib and appreciate your Iron Fist fighting style. However, it's not certain if Microsoft would be willing to buy companies such as Capcom, Sega, or Konami.

The problem is, when a game company purchases a developer, there's a lot of duplication involved, Microsoft bigwig Ed Fries says. Simply, this means that what's being bought is more than games—it's an entire company with a lot of executives, employees, and equipment. It's a great notion to think that Microsoft would be purchasing *Metal Gear Solid*, *Dance Dance Revolution*, and the *Silent Hill* franchises, for example, but the reality is a lot more complicated. For this reason, it's more likely that Microsoft would purchase a developer and not, say, a publisher.

As for the rest, Xbox is not doing well in Japan right now. But given time—and a concerted effort—the console might win an audience in the land of the Rising Sun.

I remember reading in *Xbox Nation* #7 that Microsoft has no official mascot. Why would Microsoft want a mascot in the first place? In this day and age it will not matter who stands in front of the console, but what quality of games that are coming out for that console. There are many mascots to choose from though, take Master Chief for example. Bad-ass green killer cyborg ninja plus bad ass green box with mumbling voices! It's a perfect match, but I hope that Microsoft doesn't consider having an official mascot. The X on the Xbox is representative enough.

CamC'..B.u.G representa

Without solid Japanese support for Xbox, Microsoft should get used to **being second banana.**— Chris Huntley

We're pushing to have letter-writing maniac Scott Whitmore become the mascot for Xbox. Microsoft has sent a few threatening cease-and-desist letters to us regarding this matter, but we remain ever hopeful.

And speaking of Mr. Whitmore....

Okay, I have had an ongoing love affair with Ivy from *Soul Calibur* since she first came to life on my Dreamcast in 1999. I still love her to this day, when she made her debut in *Soul Calibur II* in the arcade in summer '02, I fell even more in love. My #1 hot, sexy, fighting game girl chick had become even better! Now that I have her at home again I am set for life. I'd marry her virtually.

Brigitte Nielsen, a lady actor from the movie *Red Sonja*, alongside Arnold Schwarzenegger, looks to be my Ivy brought to life! I'd hope they would cast her as Ivy in the upcoming *Soul Calibur* movie, since her work in *Red Sonja* involved a sword and fighting, she'd be perfect!

Her body really really resembles Ivy in many ways. I know this because I have studied every sector of Ivy's polygon body very, very closely. The great thing about Ivy in *Soul Calibur* and *Soul Calibur II*, is that not only is her outfit sexy, her body is just immaculate. Her breasts are perfect in *Calibur II*, and the way her butt moves in the thong part of her outfit is just breathtaking.

If you go to the character profile and select her fighting phrases and go to the cries of getting hit by an opponent, well, you can get virtual with her as she cries out for you.

I apologize that this e-mail is a bit fanboy fanatic, but I could not resist. I have to proclaim my love for Ivy!
Scott Whitmore

Words fail.

Xbox Nation is a great magazine, and I look forward to it every two months. That said, your "exclusive first hands-on" with *Fable*, which I'd eagerly awaited for two months, was a disappointment. There was little new information, and much of the article was devoted to the same sort of "it's going to be so amazing" preview that I've read elsewhere. Don't get me wrong: I think *Fable* is probably the most important game in development. But if you're going to advertise a feature as a "hands-on," it should indeed be one. The article had none of the first-person details that Greg Orlando would write after actually playing a game hands-on; instead, it was replete with quotes from the Carter brothers, describing what the game's features are going to be. Orlando never even described what the camera system actually was—he just quoted the Carters saying what it would be like! That's not a hands-on. Maybe we can get one soon?
John Gonzalez

I loved the coverage of *Fable* in this issue of *Xbox Nation*. It seems like the game will never be released soon enough. From all that you wrote about it, Blue Box is trying to do some truly innovative things with the game. There is one thing that could really put this game over the top for me, though. Just as in games such as
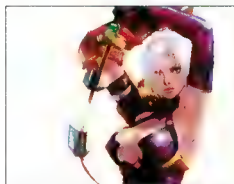
This is a videogame woman. She's not real and, as such, not very good on dates. You can, however, get "virtual" with her.

Jedi Knight, and *Black & White*, most players will go into this game with the decision already made as to whether their alter-ego will be good or evil.

The real challenge for Blue Box would be to change that decision mid-game through some event, or chain of events. A character who started out as evil, could have something happen to him, that affects him so profoundly, that he turns his alternate life around and becomes a hero.

A character who started out with all good intentions, could have events occur in his game life that sends him off on a career of murder and deceit. The thing is for some, the events may turn good to evil, and vice-versa. For others, it may strengthen the resolve to push on with original intentions. Give us the choice, and then give us strong motivations to change our minds about the choice we have made. A few great movies have pulled this off with audiences. Why not this game?
Joseph Dennis

You're not talking about *Porky's Revenge*, are you?

Where have all the flight sims gone?
Am I the only person who finds it odd that there is a huge void on Xbox when it comes to flight simulators? Think of the possibilities of going on Xbox Live and having dogfights. I would love to see someone like NovaLogic put out different games like F-22, FA-18, F-16, MiG Mirage, etc., and have it where they could all go online and fight against each other (they did this on the PC). All I see coming is *Crimson Skies* which doesn't look good to me, I would like real planes, not made-up ones. Please tell me something is on the way. I can't be the only one looking for a good flight sim.
Keith Van Asten

There's nothing like a good flight sim, Keith, and there's nothing like a good flight sim coming to Xbox in the near future, either. PC developers seem to be keeping their hardcore sims for the computer set, and we can't say that's an entirely bad idea. For now, Xbox owners will have to be content with air-combat games such as *Crimson Skies* and *Secret Weapons Over Normandy*.
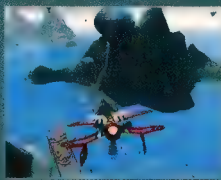
Keith Van Asten, you must fly the *Crimson Skies* and like it! Sadly, there is no news about a hardcore flight simulator coming to Xbox.

Next time in *Xbox Nation*
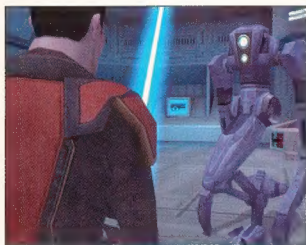
Knights of the Old Republic

It's been a long time coming, but BioWare has assured us that reviewable code will be on its way in short order. *Knights* features malleable characters, up to nine different NPCs who can join the player's party, Good versus Evil, cats and dogs, living together...should be quite the fun.

Massively Multiplayer Extravaganza

XBN gets to the heart of the MMORPG in a comprehensive, forward-looking feature. Hold your breath for extended, in-depth looks at *True Fantasy Live Online*, *Star Wars: Galaxies*, and *Citizen Zero*. Why? Because it takes a nation of millions to enjoy these upcoming titles.

Reviews ahoy!

Soul Calibur II, Pirates of the Caribbean, Gladius, ESPN NFL 2K4, Group-S Challenge, Madden NFL 2004, Otogi, Dino Crisis 3, Alter Echo, Star Trek: Shattered Universe, Backyard Wrestling, Tetris Online, and many, many more.

Will Wright

He brought life to the Sims, created the world's best-selling game, and made it okay to be incontinent and take a whiz on the kitchen floor. Will Wright brings home the bacon, and *XBN* fries it up in a pan. Just for you, dear reader.

Far Cry

XBN cops the exclusive first look at Ubi Soft and Crytek's brilliant first-person shooter. Open, expansive environments, next-generation A.I., and some of the finest graphics seen to date. This one's gonna be big...

AD INDEX

REFLECTIONS OF POWER. Exclusively on the Xbox, Todd McFarlane's Spawn® charges into the SoulCalibur® II arena. The battle will be hard fought with old Soul Calibur favorites and new masters ready to battle anyone with the guts. And the fighting continues with over 10 modes of play, including the new Weapon Master Mode, giving you the chance to unlock hundreds of weapons, costumes, arenas and hidden characters.